

MADE CHINA

JOURNAL



VOLUME 9, ISSUE 2, JUL–DEC 2024

CHINESE JOURNALISM IS DEAD

Long Live Chinese Journalism!



MADE IN CHINA JOURNAL

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MADE IN CHINA
JOURNAL

VOLUME 9, ISSUE #2
JUL–DEC 2024

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EDITORIAL

Chinese Journalism Is Dead Long Live Chinese Journalism!

Chinese journalism is dead—long live Chinese journalism! The dramatic transformations of China's media landscape over the past decade have led many to declare the death of quality journalism in the country. The Party-State's tightening grip on information, the dismantling of once vibrant investigative outlets, and the growing precarity of media professionals seem to confirm this narrative. And yet, as traditional spaces for critical reporting shrink, new modes of journalistic practice continue to emerge, often in dispersed and unexpected forms. From citizen-led investigations and social media exposés to transnational collaborations, Chinese journalism has not disappeared—it has adapted. This issue of the *Made in China Journal* explores the shifting terrain of journalistic production in and about China, tracing the resilience, reinvention, and risks that define the profession today.

We open with an essay in which **Kecheng Fang** maps the evolving landscape of quality journalism in China, exploring where reliable information continues to thrive under increasing restrictions. **Dan Chen** examines the evolution of *minsheng xinwen* (民生新闻, 'news about people's livelihoods') in China as a mechanism of controlled criticism within an authoritarian system. Through case studies such as stories of excessive parking fines and unfinished residential complexes, she illustrates how local television news resolves citizen grievances, disciplines bureaucrats, and reinforces state legitimacy. **Tucker Wang-Hai** explores how Chinese foreign-aimed journalists—individuals who are expected to use and normalise foreign platforms at work—navigate a changing work environment as their journalistic practices and traditional routines are increasingly platform-based and digitally oriented.

Li Jun presents a historical analysis of the evolving relationship between Chinese news media and the feminist movement over the past three decades, investigating how Chinese feminists have strategically utilised media platforms to advance their causes. **Vivian Wu** draws from two decades in journalism and her experience founding the independent media platform *Dasheng* (大声) to discuss the challenges that the Chinese-language diasporic media is currently facing and tracing some possible ways forward. **Altman Yuzhu Peng** takes on the Great Translation Movement, an activist-journalistic initiative that challenges the authority of the Chinese Party-State by exposing its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and highlighting its oversimplified and problematic portrayal of the Chinese people. Finally, **Hangwei Li** draws from her fieldwork in China, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Mauritius to provide a nuanced understanding of African journalistic agency in diverse contexts and propose a future research agenda.

The issue also includes three opinion pieces. In the first, an anonymous scholar discusses how 'Northern frontier culture' has recently become a trendy term in propaganda texts and academic publications in and about Inner Mongolia, which has resulted in the marginalisation and de-territorialisation of one group: ethnic Mongols from the region. **Hongwei Bao** and **Maghiel Van Crevel** celebrate Chinese poet and fiction writer Mu Cao's recent victory in a prestigious international prize, exploring how his work challenges mainstream narratives about queerness, class, and survival by giving voice to those at the margins of China's underclass. **Trissia Wijaya** and **Kanishka Jayasuriya** investigate how China's dual-use technology push has sparked new hype about techno-nationalism, great-power rivalry, and resource extraction, wondering what this means for the global order and what are the broader socioeconomic and environmental implications.

In the China Columns section, **Murong Xuecun** tells the story of how his life came to be intertwined with that of one of innumerable faceless censors in charge of checking his social media activity when he was back in China. **James Leibold** focuses on the expansion of the Tibet-Aid Project in Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'New Era' of Han-centric nationalism, arguing that the project facilitates Han settler colonialism in the Tibet Autonomous Region. **Zhangluyuan Charlie Yang** draws from her fieldwork

in Hangzhou to challenge the idea that uxori-local marriage is often celebrated in the contemporary Chinese online sphere and beyond as a sign of female empowerment. **Jane Hayward** looks back at century-old Marxist debates about the ‘agrarian question’ and contends that today, after decades of breakneck urbanisation, China is seeing the face of this question from the other side: are the cities filling up as planned and, where not, what should be done?

Andrew Kipnis delves into social change in China by working through some Chinese examples of the place of the past in the present: location-based social control in the Great Famine, the birth-planning policy, and the recent Covid-related lockdowns in Shanghai. **Jeremy Brown**’s essay traces the birth, growth, and afterlives of the claim, first made by Mao Zedong and then popularised by Liu Shaoqi in 1951, that the Chinese Communist Party is ‘great, glorious, and correct’. **Zachary Lowell, Mengyao Li, and Yuzong Chen** reflect on their fieldwork experiences in China to discuss the challenges of doing field research in the country after the Covid-19 pandemic. **Luanjiao Hu** and **Ling Han** explain that, thanks to the popularity of digital platforms, feminism, and disabled women’s increased educational attainment, a growing number of female-led disabled persons’ organisations has emerged in China—a welcome change in a movement traditionally dominated by men. Finally, **Yue Hou** draws from original surveys and personal narratives to investigate the effectiveness of China’s educational public diplomacy in winning the hearts and minds of students from the Global South who studied in China with Chinese state support.

In the Work of Arts section, **Giorgio Strafella** traces the history of Songzhuang Art Village on the outskirts of Beijing, arguing that the place continues to be one of the most significant art spaces in the world even though its origins remain under-researched and are often misunderstood. **Ruoxi Liu** and **Binghuang Xu** discuss how conventional family narratives in contemporary China can be reinterpreted through exhibition-making, arguing that re-examining family history serves as a method to challenge official and authoritarian narratives within families and Chinese society, reinterpret power relationships, and reconstruct history.

We wrap up the issue with a series of conversations about recent books. **Nicholas Loubere** talks to **Tamara Jacka** about her *Ginkgo Village: Trauma and*

Transformation in Rural China (ANU Press, 2024). **Loretta Ieng-tak Lou** engages **Andrea E. Pia** about his *Cutting the Mass Line: Water, Politics, and Climate in Southwest China* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024). **Yangyang Cheng** discusses with **Susan Greenhalgh** her *Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola* (University of Chicago Press, 2024). **Christian Sorace** chats with **Pang Laikwan** about her *One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty* (Stanford University Press, 2024). And **Anna Ting** talks to **Flornence Mok** about her *Covert Colonialism: Governance, Surveillance and Political Culture in British Hong Kong, c. 1966–97* (Manchester University Press, 2023). ■

The Editors

A solid red square with a thin white border, centered on a light gray background.

OP-EDS



'The Grassland Eulogy', one of the 75 songs in the 2024 *Northern Frontier Melody* program. The lyrics praise the two 'heroic grassland sisters' (草原英雄小姐妹), who almost sacrificed their lives to protect the sheep of their people's commune in a snowstorm in February 1964.

Constructing a De-Ethnicised Inner Mongolia

T.S.

'Northern frontier culture' (北疆文化, *umrat khiliin soyol*) has recently become a trendy term in propaganda texts and academic publications in and about Inner Mongolia. Numerous activities, including cultural festivals, archaeological discoveries, intangible heritage exhibitions, and academic conferences, are organised under the banner of or carry the tag 'northern frontier culture'. For instance, the newspaper *Inner Mongolia Daily* (内蒙古日报), the official mouthpiece of the provincial committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), recently produced a special program called *Northern Frontier Melody* (北疆歌韵, *Umrat Khiliin Duulal*) to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (Inner Mongolia Daily 2024). It featured 75 episodes, each introducing the history of a well-known local song, mostly grassland songs (草原歌曲) and red songs (红歌).

Beijiang (北疆, literally 'northern frontier') traditionally refers to the region north of the Tian Shan mountain range—the northern part of Xinjiang since the Qing era. Li and Liu (2023) state that this region includes not only Xinjiang, but also the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Heilongjiang Province, with Inner Mongolia at its core. However, today, as it has become increasingly popular in official discourse, the term is sometimes conterminous with Inner Mongolia alone. The interesting question here is: how does this new northern frontier cultural discourse reframe the region?

The northern frontier culture was first mentioned in a July 2023 document by the provincial committee of the CCP called 'Decision of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Party Committee on the All-Round Construction of a Model Autonomous Region' (内蒙古自治区党委关于全方位建设模范自治区的决定) (People's Daily 2023). The document advanced the idea that the northern frontier culture includes grassland culture, farming, Great Wall culture, Yellow River culture, and red (revolutionary) culture. In discussing the culture's relations with Chinese civilisation, the local Party authorities said it was both a component of Chinese civilisation (中华文明) and a factor contributing to the forging of the 'unified community of the Chinese nation' (中华民族共同体意识). As repeatedly expounded by successive media reports and academic works, one central tenet that enlivens the northern frontier culture is 'ethnic exchange, interaction, and mingling'.

In this piece, I discuss how the discursive construction of the northern frontier culture anonymises ethnicity and foregrounds locality. I suggest that the making and promotion of a territory-based and de-ethnicised northern frontier culture marginalise and deterritorialise the titular group: ethnic Mongols from Inner Mongolia.

Lexical Matters

Before I proceed, we must dwell briefly on the Chinese word *jiang* (疆) and especially its Mongolian rendering in propaganda texts: as *khil* ('border') rather than *khijgaar*, which literally means 'edge' and is closer in meaning to 'frontier'.

Beijiang (北疆) is shorthand for *beibu bianjiang* (北部边疆, 'northern frontier'). *Bianjiang* refers to borderland or frontier, with the word *bian* denoting periphery, edge, or fringe. The truthful Mongolian translation of *beijiang* would be *umrat khijgaar* or *umrat khijgaar oron*, which mean 'northern frontier' or 'northern borderland', respectively. Instead, *Inner Mongolia Daily* and other official media opted for *umrat khil* ('northern border'). A dictionary of the Mongolian language (Haschuluu and Yulan 2017) defines *khijgaar* as the edge of places/regions, the areas along borders, edges, peripheries, or the limit of one's heart or ideas. Meanwhile, the definition of *khil* is edge, frontier, or a state's boundary. To be sure, *khil* and *khijgaar* are nearly synonymous, but there are nuanced differences. Akin to the senses evoked by the English word 'frontier', the Mongolian word *khijgaar* denotes peripheries, distance from the centre, wilderness, or being at the limit or fringe of something.

If that is the case, why is *khil* ('border') chosen over *khijgaar* ('frontier') in the official Mongolian texts? It is because Mongols are reluctant to refer to their homeland as a frontier. The logic behind this choice is somewhat similar to the idea that underpins Mongols' omission of the ethnic inflector *hua* (华, 'Chinese') in their translation of *Zhonghua minzu* (中华民族, 'Chinese nation') as *dumdadu-yn ündüsten* (literally 'middle nation')—that is, the possibility of imagining that they are part of a supra-ethnic middle nation rather than a Han-ethnocentric nation (Baioud 2023). Their preference for 'border' over 'frontier' fits with their self-perception as a group residing inside the national fault line—the border of the Chinese nation-state (in a supra-ethnic national sense)—rather than a distant, 'uncivilised', and peripheral group dwelling in a frontier yet to be absorbed into the expanding Han-centric nation-state. The frontier's implication of a colonial dynamic is evident, for instance, in the reference in Qing sources to Dzungarian lands as Xinjiang (新疆, literally 'new frontier') after they were incorporated into the imperial dominion (see, for example, Elliott 2014). In addition, the concept of a border as a sacred line requiring protection serves Mongols' perception of themselves as a people who contribute to the nation simply by being there and guarding it, if not protecting it directly (Billé 2012).

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At a time when Chinese nation-building intensifies in the border regions and the Mongols' loyalty to the motherland undergoes new tests—such as the 2020 bilingual education reform, which provoked widespread Mongolian resistance (Atwood 2020)—there is an urgent need among Inner Mongols to present once again the image of the Mongols as a model minority and loyal Chinese citizenry to earn back the master's trust; this even at the cost of downplaying their multifaceted identities. After all, history taught the Inner Mongols dwelling along the Sino-Mongolian border that suspicions from the centre can be fatal. In an extreme example, in their recent book on the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia, Cheng et al. (2023) recount the story of an Inner Mongolian soldier accused of harbouring Mongolian nationalist and separatist desires, who, after being heavily tortured, cut open his own abdomen and pulled out his pulsating heart to show his loyalty to the CCP.

Regardless of the credibility of this and similar stories, the point is that the loyalty desired by the Han-centric state or the internalised demand to live up to the name of the model minority, which are impossible to fulfil, haunt the Mongols and animate repeated performances of political loyalty (e.g., Lacan 1996). It is exactly this logic that is in operation in the Inner Mongols' choice of the word *khil* over *khijgaar*. By using this language, they implicitly represent themselves as a people who loyally and proudly protect China's *altan khil* ('golden border'), as aptly inflected in the name of a border *sumu* ('township') in the East Üjemchin Banner (东乌珠穆沁旗) called Altan-Khil. Altan-Khil Sumu, which the state frames as a 'national security barrier' (国家安全屏障) (Altan-Khili Propaganda 2023), shares a 75-kilometre border with none other than Mongolia.

From the Chinese nation-state's perspective, the coinage of the term 'northern frontier' to refer to Inner Mongolia, on one hand, is unequivocal in its expression of the homogenising and nationalising imperial state's desire to firmly incorporate and assimilate the group which is regarded as occupying a fuzzy and linguistically and culturally still-distant frontier zone. In other words, the state strives to make everyone in this indistinct frontier area align with the state's geo-body by aggressively assimilating them into the unifying Han-centric national body, which currently goes under the name of the 'unified community of the Chinese nation'. It does so by eradicating what Bulag (2012) has called an interethnic *gehe* (隔阂, 'psychological barrier').

Yet, on the other hand, as Frank Billé (2012) points out, the Chinese State's perception of itself as an ever-advancing cultural front exists in parallel with a formal demarcation (and resolution) of its national borders. Resonating with this line of argument, Andrew Grant (2018) also underscores China's double body—that is, the simultaneous assertion of a territorially bounded Chinese nation-state and the promotion of an expansive civilisational state. Largely aligning with this, the Chinese term *beijiang wenhua* expresses the state's dual desire of expanding

the front of the Han Chinese cultural dominion into the frontier and domesticating those who fall within its demarcated national border. However, this double connotation of the term 'northern frontier' is lost in the Mongolian translation *umrat khil*. As mentioned, it is so because the Inner Mongols, perhaps out of both fear and loyalty, choose to reinforce a rigid and linear boundary between nation-states and claim: 'We are dwelling inside the border rather than in a dangerously liminal and shifting frontier zone!'

Anonymising Ethnicity through Localisation

To consolidate the hegemony of the Han Chinese culture in the borderland, the discourse of the northern frontier culture adopted two interlocked techniques: ethnicity anonymisation and locality foregrounding. Both strategies effectively de-territorialise Mongols from Inner Mongolia.

One of its components, the Great Wall culture, is represented as a culture that is not identified with any ethnicity, as nomadic groups and agriculturalists constantly engaged in interethnic contact, exchange, and blending along the Great Wall since antiquity. It is represented as a material embodiment of ethnic mixing, conveniently avoiding how the Great Wall also historically acted as a boundary between nomads and agriculturalists. Similarly, the Yellow River culture, a highly Han-inflected but supposedly ethnically neutral culture, is generally added to the northern frontier culture. Specifically, the military reclamation of the Ordos area by General Meng Tian for a short period during the Qin Dynasty (third century BCE), as well as Han Chinese immigration to and agricultural colonisation of the Hetao Plain (nineteenth century) on the southern edge of the Mongolian Plateau, are presented as the prime evidence of the existence of an anonymous Yellow River culture and farming culture within Inner Mongolia.

That the dimension of ethnicity is hidden and largely anonymised in the northern frontier culture is further evidenced in how the grassland culture is defined. In fact, before the emergence of the term 'northern frontier culture' in Inner Mongolia, it was the 'grassland culture' (草原文化) that was propagated by the Chinese State as an umbrella term to cover the cultures of peoples who live on the Mongolian Plateau. This grassland culture encompasses the cultures of nomadic groups such as the Xiongnu, Xianbei, Turks, Khitan, Mongolians, and Manchurians. As to lifeways, it is argued that the grassland culture entails hunting, gathering, farming, and industrialisation, apart from its primary component, nomadic pastoralism. As the Inner Mongolian scholar Nasan Bayar has pointed out, this means that:

To consolidate the hegemony of the Han Chinese culture in the borderland, the discourse of the northern frontier culture adopted two interlocked techniques: ethnicity anonymisation and locality foregrounding. Both strategies effectively de-territorialise Mongols from Inner Mongolia.

Inner Mongolia, as the main domain for grassland culture, is no longer the homeland for merely Mongolians, who are the titular group of the region in official documents. In other words, there is a potential dimension to deterritorialise the Mongolians from Inner Mongolia. (Bayar 2014: 450)

Hence, although the name ‘grassland culture’ conjures images of nomadic pastoralism or sustains connections with Mongolian ethnicity, its official definition strives to disrupt this association. The anonymisation and marginalisation of Mongolian ethnicity and their culture from Inner Mongolia, however, go much further in the northern frontier culture discourse. Here, the once regionwide representative grassland culture is subsumed within and relegated to be a mere constituent of the northern frontier culture along with newly added ethnicity-transcending cultures such as the red revolutionary and Great Wall cultures.

Accordingly, in many events organised under the banner of the northern frontier culture, ethnicity is not featured as a keyword. Instead, the conglomeration of largely de-ethnicised and locality-based cultures looms large. For instance, the intangible cultural heritage exhibition in July 2024 in East Üjemchin Banner displays Üjemchin-style traditional costumes, knuckle-bone games, and traditional Mongolian medicine-making techniques alongside folk embroidery from Shaanxi Province and Wenzhou, Baotou papercut art, as well as Evenki sun-shaped accessories. A relevant news report states that the exhibition aims to promote the northern frontier culture (*umrat khiliin soyol*) and transmit Chinese culture (*dumdadu-yn soyol*) (East Üjemchin Integrated Media 2024).

In his study of the promotion of Alasha camel culture in western Inner Mongolia, Thomas White (2024a) remarked on how culture is increasingly scaled in terms of locality rather than ethnicity. Alasha’s camels, he argues, ‘came to enjoy protection as a *local* breed, and their conservation has reinforced emergent conceptions of a post-ethnic *local* culture, in which differences between nationalities are de-emphasised’ (White 2024b). The northern frontier culture epitomises such locality-based formulation of post-ethnic cultures.

That the propagation of the northern frontier culture encourages the flourishing of subregional cultures is also on full display in the newly branded West Liao River culture in eastern Inner Mongolia. In July 2024, Tongliao Municipality (formerly known as Jerim League) in eastern Inner Mongolia organised a series of events as part of the West Liao River Cultural Festival (西辽河文化节) to create and develop this local cultural brand. Despite Mongolian songs and dances taking a substantial part in one of its events, the Folksong Night, the program was titled ‘The Liao River Melody, the Northern Frontier Sentiment’ (辽河韵北疆情) (Tongliao Integrated Media 2024). On that occasion, experts gathered at an academic workshop on Liao River culture unanimously emphasised how the upper stream of the river, which flows across the Inner Mongolian municipalities of Chifeng and Tongliao, has nurtured different lifeways, including farming, pastoralism, and

fishing, witnessed ethnic exchange and blending, and forms one part of the northern frontier culture. In short, the emergence of the northern frontier culture encourages, in the words of official media, ‘the excavation and development’ (挖掘和发展) of de-ethnicised subregional cultures across Inner Mongolia (Tongliao Integrated Media 2024).

De-Politicising Mongolianness

By reformulating cultures in terms of localities, the northern frontier culture discourse creates a depoliticised, de-ethnicised, and ‘model’ Inner Mongolian autonomous region where no singular ethnicity’s culture acts as a representative. Rather, it is the anonymous and overarching end product of ethnic exchange and mingling—the northern frontier culture that is an integral element of Chinese civilisation (中华文明)—that acts as a legitimate symbol of Inner Mongolia.

Needless to say, the narratives of northern frontier culture and its twin rhetoric of localisation and de-ethnicisation of cultures closely follow the calls of the so-called second-generation ethnic policy for ‘de-politicisation [去政治化] and culturalisation [文化化] of ethnicity to reduce *minzu* [ethnic] autonomy to a deracinated form of “culture” (Sinica 2019, cited in Sorace 2020). To cite the argument of Ma Rong (2014: 241), one of the key champions of the second-generation ethnic policy, ‘a depoliticisation of the nationality issue in China is to urge these minority groups to move away from its political appeal (i.e. nationality consciousness for self-determination or independence) and to move in the direction of cultural and socioeconomic demands’.

Clearly, such a rallying call is materialised in the hyped northern frontier culture trumpeted across Inner Mongolia since late 2023. In his discussion of the ‘bilingual’ education reform in Inner Mongolia in relation to China’s radical departure from its early Marxist-Leninist principles and embrace of a melting-pot formula, Christian Sorace (2020: 42) argues that ‘the changing reality will most likely leave in place the institutional structure and name of the Autonomous Region, while further emptying its content and any remaining meaningful sense of “autonomy”’. This essay to some extent has shown that now even the empty names carrying any traces of Mongolianness are facing erasure and replacement through the rescaling of ethnicity in terms of locality and culture. ■



Photo taken during 'Louder Than Words', a public interview event organised as part of the Prince Claus Fund Awards Week. Source: Heba Khamis.

On Being Queer and Underclass

Mu Cao and His Poetry

Hongwei BAO, Maghiel VAN CREVEL

The Prince Claus Fund is a Netherlands-based independent organisation dedicated to the advancement of culture and development, particularly in places where culture is under pressure. Every two years, it gives out six Impact Awards to outstanding cultural practitioners and artists worldwide. One of the 2024 laureates was Chinese poet and fiction writer Mu Cao (墓草), who was selected for his promotion of 'queer expression through bold, dark, and expressive poetry' (Prince Claus Fund 2024a). In December 2024, he travelled to Amsterdam to receive his award at the Royal Palace.

Mu Cao, whose literary name means 'grass on the graves', is China's first openly gay poet and his writing is 'marked by a forcefulness that can sow the seeds of emancipation and social change' (van Crevel 2024: 98). He has been described as a 'poet from among the common people' and a 'voice from the bottom of Chinese society' (Words Without Borders 2016). The biographical details that accompany his work are at once ironic and serious. They are characterised more by what he is not and has not done than by what he is and has done: 'He has no diplomas, he is not a member of the Chinese Writers Association, and he publishes almost entirely outside of official channels' (Words Without Borders

2016). In one of his poetry collections, the inside cover notes tongue-in-cheek that he has ‘not yet won the Nobel Prize for Literature’ (Mu Cao 2002).

Mu Cao’s work is defined by its rootedness in unofficial, outside-the-system subalternity in Chinese society and its striking difference from mainstream literature. Both his queer sexuality and his decades-long experience as a precarious migrant worker put him at the margins of Chinese society. This double marginalisation has shaped the content and aesthetics of his creative work.

A Queer ‘Battler’ Poet

Mu Cao was born in 1974 into a rural household in Xihua County, Henan Province, one of the poorest regions in China. He dropped out of high school at age 15, following a conflict with his teacher. After helping his mother, a dressmaker, to run her makeshift street stall for a couple of years, he went to the provincial capital, Zhengzhou, to look for work. He thus joined the countless precarious internal migrant workers known in China as ‘battlers’ (打工者 or 打工人), meaning people who work for the boss, selling their labour because that is all they have, with no control over their destiny. The English translation used here comes from an Australian expression for lower-class people faced with similar economic insecurity who persevere in the face of adversity. It matches the linguistic register of the Chinese source term and, just like the latter, it can be either pejorative or worn as a badge of pride (van Crevel 2017b: 246; Wikipedia n.d.).

Since the 1980s, about 300 million people have left the Chinese countryside for the cities to seek economic betterment and urban adventure, and escape poverty and the strictures of village life. Having become fixtures in the Chinese cityscape wherever low-status work must be done (construction, cleaning, factory work, courier services, waste-picking, sex work, etcetera), they often generate unease or disdain among native urbanites and are structurally confronted with discrimination. Over the decades, first in Zhengzhou, then in Beijing, then in Zhengzhou again, Mu Cao has held a series of odd jobs—cleaner, cook, barber, street vendor, garage keeper, factory worker, and many more—none of which lasted long. He works to save enough money to quit so he can write, until the money runs out and he must find work again. Mu Cao has lived this precarious life, usually without a stable residence or medical insurance, for 35 years.

Mu Cao loves literature and his childhood dream was to become a writer. He taught himself poetry and fiction by reading whatever he could get his hands on, which meant an eclectic curriculum featuring many cheap pirated editions of Chinese and foreign classics. In 1998, he self-published his first poetry collection, titled *Mu Cao’s Poetry* (墓草的诗). He has since disowned it, dismissing his earliest work as immature lyricism. The real start of his creative career as a writer coincided with his discovery of his own gay sexuality. Around 2000, he

Mu Cao was born in 1974 into a rural household in Xihua County, Henan Province, one of the poorest regions in China. He dropped out of high school at age 15, following a conflict with his teacher.



Mu Cao's works. Source: Maghiel Van Crevel.

discovered underground gay life in Zhengzhou and online. Soon after, he came out as gay in his poetry. The double marginalisation outlined above has underpinned his work ever since.

Despite being talented and writing diligently, Mu Cao found it difficult to get his work published, since both queerness and socioeconomic inequality count as politically sensitive topics in China. Having received numerous rejections from publishers and literary journals, Mu Cao was among the earliest literary authors to take to the internet to explore what came to be known as 'web literature' (网络文学). Under that umbrella, he worked tirelessly to advance 'comrade literature' (同志文学), with 'comrade' being an informal Chinese term to refer to LGBTQI+ people. In 2000, thanks to his web design skills (for which he had presciently taken a course in Zhengzhou), Mu Cao founded the 'Comrade Poetry Web' (同志诗歌网) and the 'Comrade Poetry Forum' (同志诗歌论坛), two websites that promoted queer Chinese-language poetry online. Later that year, he joined his fellow Henanese poet Ren Yu (人与, later known as Xiang Yu 向与) in establishing *Scrutiny* (审视), an unofficial poetry journal, and serving as its vice editor-in-chief. Mu Cao came out as gay in the first issue. The 'Comrade Poetry Web' was shut down in 2006, but Mu Cao continued showcasing his writing on his own website—designed in the colours of the rainbow flag—for many years, until this was also shut down, in the late 2010s (Mu Cao 2018).

Mu Cao's contribution to queer literature has been recognised in the pages of *GaySpot* (乐点), China's longest-running queer community magazine—also an unofficial publication. He served as co-editor of its first issue and the magazine has since championed his work. *GaySpot* anthologised his poetry in *Islands* (屿), a special issue on Chinese queer

In all, Mu Cao has so far published six poetry anthologies and four works of fiction in Chinese, including survey collections of his short stories (孤獨的邊緣 *The Lonely Fringe*) and his poetry (在底層 *On the Underside*) with Showwe Press in Taipei in 2023.

literature published in 2018. In 2022, the magazine also released an exquisitely crafted survey anthology of his poetry titled *20: Twenty Years of Mu Cao's Poetry* (20: 墓草20年诗选).

Mu Cao's contribution to Chinese literature has largely been overlooked, perhaps due to the double stigmatisation of his sexuality and underclass status—and, of course, because censorship has rendered him close to invisible outside the official literary circuit. In fact, his talent and vision have long been in evidence, not just in his own writing but also in his work as an editor. In 2002, he edited an ambitious volume called the *2001 Chinese Web Poetry Yearbook* (二〇〇一年度中国网络诗歌), which was intended as an annual publication but never made it past the first issue. In 2006, he served as editor of *The Gaze: Twenty-First-Century Chinese Unofficial Avant-Garde Literature* (凝望: 21世纪中国民间先锋文学). Both these books are headstrong, original publications that show an ambitious editorial vision and a determination to raise the visibility of contemporary Chinese writers whose styles 'rock the boat'. In 2015, amid an ever-tightening political climate, Mu Cao was awarded the Underground Poetry Award by *Freebooters* (江湖), one of the most radical unofficial Chinese poetry journals in the new century.

In all, Mu Cao has so far published six poetry anthologies and four works of fiction in Chinese, including survey collections of his short stories (孤獨的邊緣 *The Lonely Fringe*) and his poetry (在底層 *On the Underside*) with Showwe Press in Taipei in 2023. All his other books were published unofficially in mainland China, even though some purport to be official publications—a common practice to evade official censorship—with some citing Hong Kong as their place of publication but tellingly typeset in simplified characters. These unofficial publications are hard to find outside the personal networks through which they travel, but five of his poetry books and both his edited volumes can be accessed online at the Leiden University Libraries digital collection of unofficial poetry from China. Mu Cao's work has been translated into English, French, Slovenian, Dutch, Japanese, and Italian. His 2011 novel *Qi'er* 弃儿 (literally, 'Orphans'), was translated into English by Scott E. Myers as *In the Face of Death We Are Equal* and published in 2019. Mu Cao's work has received some critical attention in the Anglophone world and beyond in recent years (Bao 2018, 2020; Ehrenwirth 2024; Picerni 2024; van Crevel 2017a, 2024; van Crevel and Bao forthcoming).

Mu Cao's work often follows the literary tradition of critical realism, depicting the harsh realities of people's lives on the margins of society as a form of social critique. Sometimes, his writing is mixed with surrealism, black humour, and magic realism. Death is a key theme in his works and the graveyard a recurring trope. In a laudation for Mu Cao's work that the Prince Claus Fund asked him to write, Maghiel van Crevel (2024: 98) describes Mu Cao's writing style as follows: 'His raw, down-to-earth language can be at once mischievous and deadly serious, provocative and introspective, proud and devastated, hilarious and heartbreaking.' The Prince Claus Impact Award jury concludes that

Mu Cao has a ‘unique literary voice, characterised by its raw and fierce qualities, fearlessly delving into taboo subjects with rare expressiveness’ (Prince Claus Fund 2024b).

‘Comrade Poetry’: A Queer Voice from the Margins of Society

Much of Mu Cao’s poetry qualifies as ‘comrade poetry’ (同志诗歌), a Chinese term for queer poetry that focuses on the gay experience. Because of his underclass background, his poems often depict queer lives that are repressed and erased from the middle-class imagination and embodied in activities such as cruising in public places like parks and public toilets. This poem conveys the fleeting but beautiful feelings of a same-sex encounter between two migrant workers:

走在我右边的兄弟

太阳升起来的时候
走在我右边的兄弟
比我年轻
鞋子上还带着油菜花的清香
他匆匆的赶路
影子遮挡住了我的脸

我额头的汗水已经冰凉
眼角的皱纹还在延伸
冷笑与他搭话
言语中漏下槐花般的忧伤
我知道他不会停下来
我知道我不会停下来

太阳落下去的时候
走在我右边的兄弟
回忆和我一样美好的兄弟
他匆匆赶路时
我的影子全部笼罩

a brother walking on my right

when the sun is up
a brother is walking on my right
he's younger than me



Mu Cao in conversation with Willem Alexander, King of the Netherlands, prior to the Impact Awards ceremony. Source: Frank van Beek.

his shoes carry the fragrance of rapeseed flowers
he hurries on with his journey
his shadow covers my face

the sweat on my forehead is ice-cold
the crow's feet near my eyes are getting longer
a cold smile, the exchange of a few words
from our words drips the sorrow of the pagoda tree
I know he won't stop
I know I won't stop

when the sun goes down
the brother walking on my right
remembers a brother just as pretty as me
when he hurries on with his journey
my shadow captures him in full

Similarly, the following poem portrays the cruising scene in a park in Tongzhou, Beijing, where Mu Cao lived for 18 years after leaving Zhengzhou (and before returning there again):

西海子公园

在中国 有公园的地方
总有同性恋者的脚步
这是县城的一个小小的公园
没有花朵 只有石头和树木
听说这里的他们都很饥渴

在靠近WC不远处
游逛 注视 叹息 忧郁
痴呆 自卑 发泄 孤寂
我像你一样 我像他一样
你和他像我一样被生活抛弃

在中国有黑暗的角落
总有弱势人群的呻吟

Xihaizi Park

in China where there are parks
there are the footprints of homosexuals
this is a tiny park in a county town
no flowers just rocks and trees
they say the men around here are hungry and thirsty

they gather around the public toilets
pace gaze sigh sadly
freeze self-pity let go lonely
me like you me like him
you and he like me abandoned children of life

in China wherever there are dark corners
you can hear the groans of the vulnerable

The queer life in these poems stands in stark contrast to the middle-class, cosmopolitan gay urban life portrayed in Chinese queer films and *danmei* (耽美) fiction—that is, the Chinese version of Boys Love literature, which depicts romanticised gay love between beautiful young boys (Bao 2018, 2020). Mu Cao's writing shows a squeezed-out, repressed queer life demarcated by the men's social class and their urban geography. The contrast Mu Cao offers serves as a reminder of the 'quali-

ties of desire’ (Rofel 2007)—that is, how neoliberalism crafts desiring subjects such as gay men in China but at the same time divides them into desirable and undesirable, along intersecting lines of class and sexuality.

‘Battler Poetry’: Poetry as Social Critique

Mu Cao’s writing also comes under the category of ‘battler poetry’ (打工诗歌) (van Crevel 2021), written by precarious migrant workers and addressing their socioeconomic experiences. Like other battler poetry, Mu Cao’s poems depict the drudgery of work and the gruesome labour conditions many battlers face. The protagonists of his poems are often people living at the bottom of Chinese society: cooks, thieves, street cleaners, construction workers, factory workers on the assembly line, and so on. Some of his poems are characterised by black humour, satirising the authorities and official ideology:

小偷阿星

无业的阿星
在公园附近偷自行车时
被一名警察抓住带走
阿星想这下可完了

警察却把小偷带到家中
请他喝酒吃饭洗澡
然后此慈喜教育英俊的阿星
还答应帮他找份工作

警察哥哥带来一只安全套
用口给小偷弟弟戴上
又在自己肛门上涂上油脂雪花膏
像观音坐莲似的坐在阿星身上
阿信感激万分热泪盈眶

此时四壁微微的颤动
一面镜子掉在地上

发出兴奋的呼叫——
如果全世界的警察和小偷
都这样！！！！！！！！
天下不是太平了吗！

Petty Thief Ah Xing

jobless Ah Xing
stealing bicycles near a park
was caught by a policeman
this time I'm done for, thought Ah Xing

but the policeman took Ah Xing home
wined, dined, and showered him
mildly reprimanded the handsome Ah Xing
and even offered to find him a job

uncle policeman took out a condom
mounted it on Ah Xing with his mouth
lubed himself with some greasy cream
and sat on Ah Xing like a praying Buddha
hot, thankful tears gushed from Ah Xing's eyes

the four walls trembled
a mirror crashed to the floor
an exciting scream—
what if policemen and thieves all over the world
were like this!!!!!!!!!!
wouldn't all-under-heaven see supreme peace?

If we take this poem as a form of subaltern expression, humour becomes a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985), not only for the socially marginalised to make their lives more bearable, but also to subvert political authority through language and the imagination.

'Writing Is the Faith That Keeps Me Alive'

In a video interview conducted for his Prince Claus Impact Award, Mu Cao says: 'Writing is like a religion to me. I see it as a spiritual thing.' He concludes by reiterating that 'writing is the faith that keeps me alive' (Prince Claus Fund 2024a). In plain words, Mu Cao lives for his art. It is in the act of writing itself that his life is lifted from hardship and drudgery, from displacement and discrimination, and becomes meaningful.

In the following poem, the poet describes pursuing his literary dream despite extreme poverty:

梦游者

有时候
我对生活要求的并不太多
一盏灯都不需要
我在黑暗里走路
条条道路通向理想之门

有时候
我对生活的要求的并不太多
一张床我都不需要

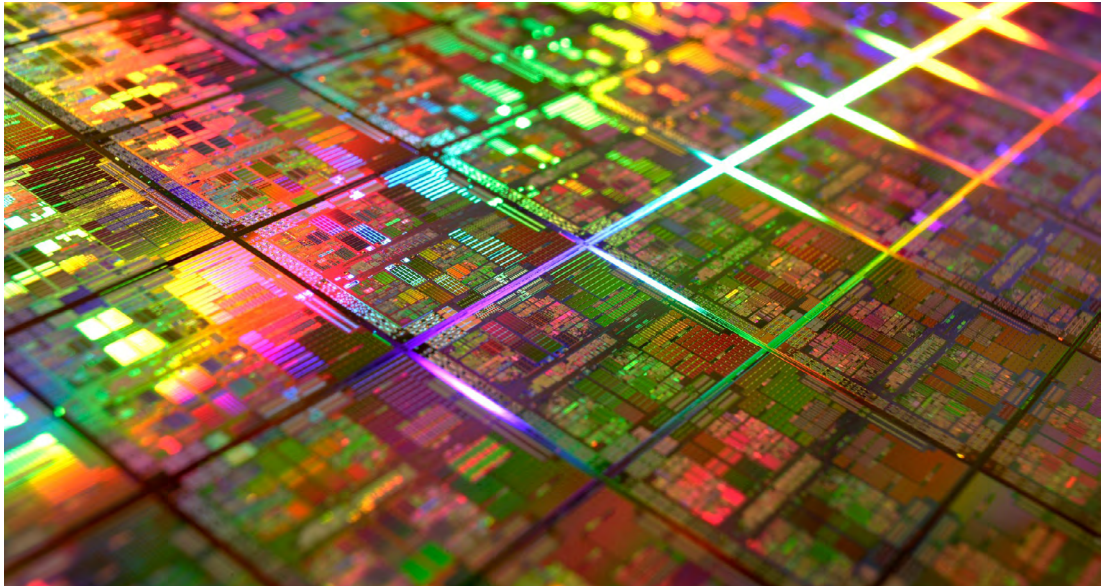
sleepwalker

sometimes
I don't expect much from life
I don't even need a lamp
while I walk in darkness
all paths take me to the dream

sometimes
I don't expect much from life
not even a bed

The philosophy of the Prince Claus Fund is that ‘culture is a basic human need’. Mu Cao’s writing testifies to this, and it is truly fitting that this fiercely original and persevering creative mind has been recognised in such a resounding manner, outside the Chinese studies bubble. The fund concludes Mu Cao’s video interview with the statement that ‘culture is defiance’. Mu Cao defies the objectification of human life by the state and neoliberal capitalism; he celebrates queer life and precarious life; most importantly, his writing shows human resilience, dignity, and creativity against the odds. ■

In addition to Mu Cao’s writing and what little there is in the way of secondary sources on his life and work, this essay is based on the authors’ longstanding professional acquaintance with Mu Cao and extensive fieldwork on the Chinese poetry scene. The authors wish to thank Mu Cao for his permission to translate his poems into English and the Prince Claus Fund for granting them permission to use some of the images from the award ceremony. They will jointly publish a biographical essay on Mu Cao in an upcoming volume of the Dictionary of Literary Biography series (van Crevel and Bao forthcoming).



*Microchips, Source:
Ai.Comput'In (CC).*

Engineering China's Militarised Neoliberalism

Class, State, and Technology

Trissia WIJAYA, Kanishka JAYASURIYA

An industrial policy renaissance, trade controls, and geopolitical challenges are further complicating the permanent features of the current global (dis)order that is already facing a poly-crisis: economic stagnation, climate crisis, and interstate war. The era of neoliberal globalisation—often seen as being synonymous with the Washington Consensus—that has long been a central feature of the international order is now over. The Washington Consensus put strong emphasis on market fundamentalism, with fiscal discipline, trade liberalisation, and deregulation as its ideological touchstones (Williamson 2004). The growing tension between the United States and China is transforming the neoliberal order, resulting in a menu of solutions—export controls, bilateral agreements, and investment screenings—that, for many sceptics, are enough to signal the demise of neoliberal governance (see, for instance, Gerstle 2022).

We contend that rather than a crisis of neoliberal governance, the current (dis)order has led to the emergence of a form of what we have elsewhere called militarised neoliberalism: a new system of market

coordination that is characterised by the repurposing and reorganisation of security and economic institutions as well as specific alliances in a way that can enable or facilitate global economic accumulation by states (Wijaya and Jayasuriya 2024). The so-called Bidenomics is an exemplar of this new militarised neoliberalism. It is based on new trade controls and the strengthening of the United States' system of allies, including the Quad, 'like-minded states', and AUKUS, which, taken together, have largely repurposed the function of US security agencies and transformed the global order (see also Rolf and Schindler 2023).

The new post-neoliberal disguise does not take shape in the context of geopolitical security per se, but rather in concomitance with the United States' structural crisis driven by 'uneven and combined development' (UCD). UCD refers to variations in state forms and systems of accumulation that interact with one another and form a variegated capitalist totality. This dynamic in turn reproduces uneven patterns of national capital accumulation.

The period from the 1990s to the 2000s, when China and the United States enjoyed ever closer economic and trade relations, resulted in rapid industrialisation in China, while the US economy became more deindustrialised, in part because of wave after wave of offshoring that led to the hollowing out of the country's industrial heartland. While militarised neoliberalism was designed to rebuild American manufacturing, it is resulting in the concentration of wealth into the hands of techno-capitalist elites at the expense of the working class. Strategic industries such as artificial intelligence (AI), batteries, and semiconductors are now served by security agreements and combative industrial policies that benefit these new capitalist elites, including companies such as Tesla and Nvidia, but fail the expectations of both the working and the middle classes.

Our key point here is that the UCD of global capitalism in the post-Cold War era has intensified the political and economic crises of the US-led neoliberal order. In this context, the development of militarised neoliberalism has manifested in an interrelated but distinct way in the 'national social formations' of both the United States and China. The response to this crisis is the emergence of hybrid economic-security institutions that, in turn, have shaped the trajectories of capitalist transformation. To be sure, China's neoliberal trajectory has been very different to that of the United States (Harvey 2005; Rolf 2021; Weber 2021). But this crisis in global capitalism has shaken China's distinctive variety of neoliberalism and led to the emergence of its own brand of militarised neoliberalism.

The variety of capitalism that has formed in China—marked by overcapacity, real estate crises, surging local government debt, unemployment, and slowing growth—has driven the country's own version of militarised neoliberalism. Put simply, as with Bidenomics, the Chinese version of militarised neoliberalism emerges as a response to pressure in the global capitalist system but also reflects China's different position within that system in relation to the United States. In China, the handling of the capitalist crisis through the usual management of

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debt and fiscal stimulation seems to have run its course. This kind of (dis)order has, rather, brought about a reconstitution of the state and market from which party politics, market instruments, and geo-economic warfare are merging. Strategic industries such as AI, batteries, and semiconductors are now served by a particular political technocracy that reflects changing class factions and state transformation. This manifests in an enhanced role for technology firms in China—often linking the state and private sectors—and the dominance of engineers and technocrats.

So, what does the Chinese version of militarised neoliberalism look like?

China's Militarised Neoliberalism

Amid intensifying trade controls and in the face of the diminishing effectiveness of fiscal stimulus, which has long been the typical crisis management tool adopted by Chinese authorities, Xi Jinping's administration has sought to promote a self-sufficient industrial base and technological progress. In 2024, the Third Plenum of the Twentieth Central Committee highlighted the importance of supply-side reforms to improve the quality of growth, improve the resilience and security of industrial supply chains, and promote 'Industry 4.0' (Yu 2024). Unlike the previous plenum, which focused more on institutional reforms, this time the emphasis was on technological sovereignty that sees the assertion of party leadership over resource allocation and market order. Here, the military-industrial sector becomes increasingly crucial, with the promotion of a new institutional model: the 'new-style whole-country system' (新型举国体制). This is a nationwide system whereby relevant resources can be mobilised to mitigate the effects of US–China technological decoupling (Naughton et al. 2023).

This new approach includes the provision of national industrial funds, the creation of national champions, and relevant policies driven by new technology and engineering technocrats that will be discussed in the following section. One of key features of this distinctive militarised neoliberalism is technocratic governance, which places engineers and scientists at the commanding heights of the state apparatus. Governance by these technocrats is strongly linked to efforts to reconsolidate not only President Xi's power but also certain factions of capital that conflict with the current capitalist social order as it is being reshaped by the United States' militarised neoliberalism. However, it is important to distinguish this dynamic from the dominance of technocratic leaders from the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM technocrats) who characterised the earlier reform period (see Gang 2023). These leaders were one of the driving forces behind the state strategies that created new sites of capital accumulation in China's coastal regions during the 1990s. This period of technocratic governance was combined with a kind of authoritarian model that attempted to institutionalise certain dimensions of the rule of law (such as adminis-

These new elites comprising engineers and data scientists not only are different from the economic technocrats who dominated key Chinese state agencies in the decades after economic reform but also are driving new forms of capitalist accumulation.

trative law), contain contestation (for instance, through village elections and a degree of power-sharing), and empower technocratic agencies in a way that resulted in what scholars called ‘fragmented authoritarianism’ (see Lieberthal and Lampton 1992; Zhang 2019). This stage saw sustained economic growth and a possible boost in the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The current mode, while also driven by technocrats, has somewhat unravelled these institutions and the former technocratic governance model. This shift was exemplified by the end of term limits for the role of President of the People’s Republic of China in 2018 through constitutional revision, facilitating a new centre of power within both the CCP and the State. Xi’s key policy tenets have re-established discipline among unruly elements of his government through measures such as anti-graft campaigns, the ouster of ‘disloyal’ high-level officials, and a crackdown on Big Tech for its ‘greed’ (Economy 2019; Huang 2023). Taken together, these measures have intensified repressive governance through old and new state security agencies, nurturing a surveillance state. As Perry (2024: 1298) neatly describes:

The Party leader, revered for his infallible Thought, commands the full loyalty of a reunified, disciplined, and reinvigorated Communist Party. To that end, advanced surveillance technology would be blended with much older methods of grassroots monitoring to give the party-state unparalleled power over society.

However, the point we make here is not merely about the surveillance state per se, but also about processes of shifting class relations that underlie this intensifying repressive governance. More crucially, this new state form is indeed a response to the political contradictions that have long been a feature of the technocratic governance model in China. Central to these shifting class relations is the fusion of economic and security imperatives that is now sitting at the heart of a new generation of ‘red and expert’ technocrats who not only demonstrate political loyalty to Xi’s regime but also have relevant expertise and technical chops. This is occurring through the advancement of strategic sectors and the promotion of dual-use technologies (that is, technologies that can be used for both civilian and military purposes) that are core points of the new ‘dual circulation’ development strategy adopted by the Party-State. These ‘red and expert’ technocrats not only help strengthen Xi Jinping’s grip on power but also represent the emergence of a new interior bourgeoisie active particularly in the strategic sectors that American economic power is now attempting to bring back onshore or advance through ‘friendshoring’. These new elites comprising engineers and data scientists not only are different from the economic technocrats who dominated key Chinese state agencies in the decades after economic reform but also are driving new forms of capitalist accumulation.

The Rise of the New Interior Bourgeoisie

Following Poulantzas' (1975; 1978) usage, 'interior' or 'internal' bourgeoisie refers to a business class that establishes relations with foreign capital on which it is dependent due to structural constraints but still needs state protection from risks associated with the penetration of foreign capital into the domestic circuit of capital. The emerging interior bourgeoisie has its roots in China's 'dual circulation' strategy—a concept introduced by President Xi in 2020 amid the deepening US–China trade war. Even though it lacks detail, the strategy emphasises industrial policy and the Made in China 2025 policy, both of which aim to shield China's economy against global volatility and promote self-reliance in terms of resources and dual-use technologies. The last, in particular, are critical not only for fighting climate change, but also for the development of military applications and surveillance tools.

All this was updated in a regulation by the State Council on export controls for dual-use technologies that came into force on 1 December 2024 (State Council 2024). For one, this new development has alarmed some realists who see such export controls as part of China's expansionist strategy. However, what has been overlooked by many is the fact that these cutting-edge technologies have provided fertile ground for the new interior bourgeoisie. Indeed, this new emerging class is central to China's militarised neoliberalism and their interests are extended through the emerging group of technocratic elites who are tasked with advancing 'the new big three' strategic sectors: electric vehicles (EVs), lithium-ion batteries, and solar panels (Ouyang 2024). Consistently with what Poulantzas noted about class formation and capital accumulation, this class is maintaining 'its own economic foundation and base of capital accumulation both within its own social formation and abroad' (1975: 72). They are reshaping the project of (re-)globalisation, for instance, through subsidies and incentives for the establishment of manufacturing in emerging markets such as Mexico and Thailand, as made abundantly clear by the case of China's BYD, one of the global leaders in EV production (see Yu et al. 2024).

Recent work by Alami and Dixon (2022) has analysed how state capitalism rooted in the ever-changing geo-economic order has been reorganised into different political and institutional forms and has, in turn, expanded the role of the state. One key aspect of this is a close nexus between key state institutions and business. However, where China's case diverges from Alami and Dixon's reading of state capitalism is in the identification of the emerging business class. While finding expression through those state-led strategic sectors, this class continues to bring itself to the centre of the global capitalist economy and reconcile with various dimensions of the neoliberal global order.

Dozens of well-connected state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and tech entities have benefited from the manifestation of this new technocracy and associated priority areas. Huawei, blacklisted on the US Entity List, has been among the top recipients of the China Integrated Circuit Investment Fund, its success also benefiting entities such as Alibaba and

Dozens of well-connected state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and tech entities have benefited from the manifestation of this new technocracy and associated priority areas.

At the same time, the space for venture capital and private equity investment is clearly shrinking. In the first half of 2024, venture capital and private equity investment in China dropped 38.7 per cent and the money raised by fund managers fell 22.6 per cent.

Tencent, as they must ensure technological interoperability (Hmaid 2024). The investment fund has doubled in size over the past decade, from RMB138.7 billion in 2014 to RMB 344 billion in 2024 (Tabeta 2024). The state's active role in the sector has produced new champions—for example, the Wuhan-based Yangtze Memory Technologies Corporation (YMTC), the vanguard of the country's efforts to create a domestic semiconductor industry, as well as the Beijing-based Naura Technology Group and Shanghai Micro Electronics Equipment, which is majority controlled by the Shanghai Government. YMTC is followed closely by China's 'tech' leadership and supervised by officials in the State Council (Pan and Cao 2023).

At the same time, the space for venture capital and private equity investment is clearly shrinking. In the first half of 2024, venture capital and private equity investment in China dropped 38.7 per cent and the money raised by fund managers fell 22.6 per cent (Russell 2024; see also Wataru 2024). This contrasts with the militarised neoliberalism that we have witnessed in the United States, which has brought civilian conglomerates to the centre of its new military-industrial complex (see Wijaya and Hayes 2024). For example, as of October 2024, OpenAI, a rival to DeepSeek, had managed to raise US\$6.6 billion from civilian conglomerates, including Microsoft and Japan's SoftBank Group. In the context of the United States' militarised neoliberalism, the structural power of venture capital and executives from Silicon Valley has increased as the state's emphasis on dual-use technology advancement has become a convenient banner to orchestrate and leverage expanding military expenditure and various subsidies and other types of government support.

In the case of China, overseas backers of venture capital funds—which were used to nurture fast-growing startups—have been replaced with domestic capital, mostly from local governments. In October 2024, Guangdong Province adopted new regulations to encourage state-owned venture capital firms to invest in high-risk tech innovation sectors and called for city governments to improve mechanisms to evaluate these firms' performance. Similar regulations have been issued by the Shanghai Municipal Government. In April 2024, Shanghai kicked off a merger between the city's top-two state-owned investment firms—Shanghai State-Owned Capital Investment (上海国有资本投资有限公司) and Shanghai Science and Technology Venture Capital (Group) Company (上海科创集团)—to set up a RMB130-billion (US\$18 billion) juggernaut tasked with developing new champions (Bao and Han 2024). Yet, as the government-backed funding is also supposed to be driving job creation, only SOEs that are willing to take bigger risks and startups that work on high-end machinery and domestic replacement will be direct beneficiaries.

However, despite the growing importance of domestic funds, the internationalisation of the new interior bourgeoisie is now linked to specific geographies—for example, repressive Gulf State regimes with access to capital markets. As widely reported, Prosperity7, part of the Saudi Arabian state-owned oil group Aramco's venture capital arm, has

added to Chinese Government funds for developing a new national rival to the United States' OpenAI (Olcott 2024). The investment is indicative of Saudi Arabia's new accumulation strategy to support an ecosystem that could guard against Silicon Valley dominance in AI by investing in China's global production networks. Concurrently, Chinese companies such as Lenovo and Tencent Cloud have reportedly expanded into Saudi Arabia and built manufacturing plants there. These trends suggest that these new business groups and factions of state capital are internationalising and linking to global capital markets. In Brazil, SpaceSail, a Chinese state-backed company, is set to launch a satellite service in competition with Elon Musk's Starlink (Pooler et al. 2024).

More importantly, their internationalisation is also linked to domestic political dynamics. As we have seen, the continuation of the process of accumulation is contingent on a 'red and expert' technocracy from which Xi built his political base (Huang and Henderson 2022). The entire governing structure has seen a shift in decision-making functions from government bodies to party organs, which are now occupied by these technocratic elites who are being held accountable for priority policies (Wu 2024: 10). As Huang and Cortese (2023) recorded, 10 of the 205 full members of the CCP's Twentieth Central Committee are aerospace industry veterans who are responsible for running major projects, including for rockets and commercial jets; an additional 36 members are in leadership in provinces in which the key performance indicator is no longer GDP growth but 'nanometres' or advancing technological self-reliance. The rise of military-industrial engineers is spectacular and distinctive, and they are gaining more political clout in the context of Xi's technological self-reliance agenda. Their presence does not threaten but consolidates Xi's power due to his exclusive control over the military.

State Institutions

The importance of 'the three new' (新三样) strategic sectors—EVs, lithium-ion batteries, and solar panels—is rooted in an emerging centralised policy and decision-making regime that involves a new generation within the CCP leadership, comprising scientists and engineers turned technocratic leaders. These politico-engineers include new vice-premiers Zhang Guoqing, once a chief executive of a weapons supplier, and Liu Guozhong, who trained as an ordnance engineer. Nuclear engineer Li Ganjie now oversees senior party appointments as the head of the Organisation Department of the CCP. There is also the aerospace technology expert Ma Xingrui, appointed CCP Secretary of the turbulent Xinjiang region, and rocket scientist and former deputy general manager of China Aerospace and Technology Corporation Yuan Jiajun, who serves as Secretary of the CCP Chongqing (Yu 2023). Xi also promoted Jin Zhuanglong, aerospace engineer and businessman turned politician, to critical positions as CCP Group Secretary and Minister for Industry and Information Technology (Ding and Tang 2024).

Even though China's technocracy is led by engineers who are well-equipped with advanced education, rich corporate experience, and technological knowhow, they are, first and foremost, party-state cadres and statist business-class elites.

Superficially it would appear that the appointment of these engineers reflects a version of technocracy in which 'scientific experts advise the decision-makers and politicians consult scientists in accordance with practical needs' (Habermas 1970: 66–67). Yet, our argument is that this is not simply about the dominance of these engineering technocrats or a new form of nationalist industrial policy but rather is symptomatic of the emergence of a new capitalist class. In particular, this group is inextricably linked to the new constellation of state capital and finance that now occupies a central position within the current investment-heavy regime (Chen 2020; Cheng 2022). As explained earlier, SOEs with specialisations mirroring those of US industry incumbents in key areas have sprung to prominence, as the state realises the enormity of the self-sufficiency project in the wake of global 'de-risking China' imperatives. Therefore, the emergence of technocratic elites is indicative of the growing clout of the military-industrial engineers and scientists in the processes of Chinese state capitalist accumulation amid combined pressures.

Even though China's technocracy is led by engineers who are well-equipped with advanced education, rich corporate experience, and technological knowhow, they are, first and foremost, party-state cadres and statist business-class elites. Their promotion to top CCP leadership positions is indicative of 'the party-state's further control of the economy by enlarging the state sector to such an extent that it overwhelms the private sector' (Wu 2024: 4). In this setting, unlike in the United States, would-be entrepreneurs find it difficult to access investment capital given the government's strong emphasis on technology and heavy industries, which by nature require a more state-led approach. As Suzuki (2024) reports, startups once nurtured under the slogan 'massive entrepreneurship and innovation by all' (大众创业万众创新), popularised by the late Li Keqiang, have been rolling back their business.

Internal Contradictions

It is important to note that this does not necessarily solve long-term structural problems and inequalities—just as it did not in the United States. This is reflective of UCD. The capitalist accumulation in the United States transformed the conditions by which techno capitalism subsequently grew in China. But, while these new circuits of accumulation were promoted by elites to address geopolitical risks, they have generated uneven development. A strong push for technological self-reliance in China has entailed a large shift in class power away from the middle classes towards the emerging interior bourgeoisie. For example, as widely reported, after Wuhan reopened after the pandemic in 2021, YMTC—the new national champion—took advantage of state policies to mobilise hundreds of engineers. These workers laboured for three shifts a day in a bid to overhaul the company's production processes, replacing as much foreign equipment as possible (see Cheng and Li 2021).

Moreover, it is apparent that weak consumer demand has been unable to absorb the supply of goods produced in the country. Instead, the state continues to double down on its use of tax refunds and other ‘hidden’ subsidies for EVs and other strategic business, such as research and development for solid-state batteries and chip-making. China’s total annual tax rebates to major mainland companies rose 400 per cent over the decade up to 2023, fuelling their exports to the United States and Europe (Cho 2024). This has reinforced uneven development in which the better-off coastal regions in China continue to benefit. The most recent RMB344-billion (US\$47.5 billion) state-backed investment fund for chips, announced in May 2024, can only see fewer local governments contributing (Bao 2024). Only the larger cities and more prosperous provinces with stronger chip industries, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong, can contribute and maximise financial support.

The recent emergence of property crises represents an important turning point for the Chinese economy and potential moment for decisive intervention. The current crisis had its roots in the RMB4-trillion stimulus package introduced by China’s then premier Wen Jiabao in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Various elements of the stimulus package resulted in excessive borrowing by real estate developers, with subnational governments enjoying the revenue generated from land sales. In its September 2024 meeting, the Politburo opted to launch a package of incremental property market support measures, which mandated China’s central bank to lower interest rates and regulators to ease some property curbs to promote the stabilisation of the real estate market and boost domestic consumption. The central government through the National Financial Regulatory Administration is also ramping up ‘whitelist’ loans targeting unfinished housing projects to solve China’s faltering property market and support cash-strapped developers who have been ruled compliant with regulations. Meanwhile, local governments tailor measures according to their specific conditions by amending previous housing purchase restrictions to stabilise the housing market.

As of September 2024, 5,392 projects had received bank loans, with total financing amounting to nearly RMB1.4 trillion (Cash and Gao 2024). Yet, in part due to China’s extraordinarily weak consumption, these measures only intensified the risk of possible crisis tendencies. A deepening real estate market crisis casts a shadow over some fundamental imbalances in China’s economy. Decades of export-oriented growth and rapid investment suppressing interest rates and wages have come at the expense of household income for workers (see Rogoff and Yang 2021). While China’s central bank seeks to revive flagging economic growth by encouraging demand, social safety nets—the quickest solution to redirect people from saving to consumption—are still insufficient. China’s social transfers are low compared with those of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, accounting for about 6 per cent of GDP (Wright et al. 2024). This echoes what Huang Yasheng has noted in an interview with *China-Talk* (Ottinger and Schneider 2024):

Xi improved from a low base, which is commendable, but it was achieved largely through transfers from urban to rural people, not through fiscal stimulus ... This transfer approach can work for a period, but with the current challenges to GDP growth, it will become increasingly difficult to rely on pure transfers.

Meanwhile, as local governments struggle to balance their budgets, the top leadership pulls different policy levers to diversify local revenue sources. For instance, in an attempt to address the US\$13-trillion debt held by local governments, the central government has mandated that consumption tax collection will be done at the local level. Furthermore, to solve the liquidity crisis, many local governments have been opting to scrap the upper limit on residential land prices to revive sales.

What Lies Ahead

We write this at the start of Donald Trump's second presidency, as tech companies play a dominant role in shaping US trade and investment policy. This shift is not only reminiscent of China but also a direct response to China's strategic investments in key technologies. In both countries, the focus on technology must be understood within the broader context of global economic stagnation, which has reshaped US–China relations and capital accumulation strategies. Our article situates these political and social dynamics within global patterns of uneven and combined development, highlighting both the convergence and the divergence of Chinese and US approaches to technology.

In China, a key feature of technology-centred accumulation is the rise of what we call the new STEM technocrats—engineers and applied technology specialists who play a crucial role in shaping industrial policy, from electric vehicles to AI. Equally important is the growing influence of what we term the 'interior bourgeoisie'—a domestic capitalist class rooted in and shaped by the Chinese State but increasingly oriented towards global markets. This *interior bourgeoisie*, comprising both key state-owned and private firms, has emerged as the new hegemonic faction within the state structure. This position enables them to implement distributive measures while continuing to develop transnational linkages and alliances.

Ultimately, it remains to be seen how effectively the Chinese and US versions of militarised neoliberalism can address the deep structural crisis of global capitalism. Both models involve a hybridisation of different forms of capitalism alongside interventionist policies that incorporate neoliberal logics. This, in turn, generates pressures and contradictions within political and technocratic institutions, reshaping policy responses in both countries. One key consequence is that this crisis management may further drive these states towards intensified forms of authoritarian control, albeit under different neoliberal or developmental guises. ■

COLUMNS



It's your cold day in the sun. Source: Juliana Pinto (CC), Flickr.com.

Me and My Censor

Murong Xuecun

When Liu Lipeng first contacted me in July 2020, I was still in China. I initially wanted to write this as a fictional short story, but I didn't have the courage to do it at the time because it would have landed me in prison. I left China in 2021 and spent time thinking about writing without censorship. About a year later, I told a good friend about this story and he strongly urged me to put it in writing because not only is it about China's censorship, but also it provides insight into how China has come to be where it is today. I hope that it will help people understand more about life in China, as well as the struggles and rebellions that have taken place.

Liu Lipeng*

Freedom is orange, Ordinary Fascist tells himself with a wry smile.

It is 2013. For four full months, Liu Lipeng engages in dereliction of duty. Every hour the system sends him a huge volume of posts, but he hardly ever deletes a single word. After three or four thousand posts accumulate, he lightly clicks his mouse and the whole lot is released. In the jargon of censors, this is a 'total pass in one click' (一键全通), after which all the posts appear on Sina Weibo pages to be read by millions, then reposted and discussed.

*Liu Lipeng is his real name. All names in the text that are not followed by an asterisk in the first occurrence are real.

He logs on to the Weibo management page where many words are flagged. Orange designates ordinary sensitive words that require careful examination—words like freedom and democracy, and the three characters that make up Xi Jinping’s name. While such words regularly appear in newspapers or on TV, that does not mean ordinary citizens can use them at will.

Three months earlier, some people took to the streets brandishing placards with slogans about democracy and freedom. In no time, the police arrested them. In China, no-one is surprised by something like that.

Red is for high-risk words that cannot be published and must be deleted: ‘Falungong’, the banned spiritual group; ‘64’, after June 4, the date of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre; the names of Liu Xiaobo and the Dalai Lama; ‘Jasmine’, because, after the Tunisian revolution two years earlier, several small-scale demonstrations that have come to be known as China’s ‘Jasmine revolution’ have made the Chinese Government so nervous about the name of a small white flower, the national flower of the Philippines, that the word jasmine is given a red flag.

After three years as a censor, Liu Lipeng detests his job. He detests the white office ceiling, the grey industrial carpet, and the office that feels more like a factory. He also detests his 200-odd colleagues sitting in their cubicles, each concentrating on their mouse and keyboard to delete or hide content. Occasionally, someone finds evidence of a crime.

One afternoon, the office boredom is disturbed when Chen Min* in the next cubicle suddenly jumps up, limbs flailing ecstatically. He has uncovered Wang Dan’s Weibo account. All the censors know that Wang Dan, the 1989 student leader, political criminal, and exile, is considered by the Chinese Government to be one of the most important enemies of the state. Finding him is a big deal, and the news is immediately reported to the Sina Weibo office in Beijing. It might even be reported to the Public Security Bureau.

The following month, a senior manager comes specially from Beijing to highly commend Chen Min for discovering intelligence about the ‘enemy’, praising his ‘acuity’ and ‘high level of awareness’, and bestows on him a 400-yuan bonus. All his colleagues applaud and shout in admiration. All except Liu

Lipeng. He sits amid the crowd and glares at Chen Min’s face, flushed red with excitement, and asks himself: is this worth it?

In those four months, Liu Lipeng wants to grab Chen Min by the neck and demand to know: is this work worth it? And not just Chen Min. Every one of the censors who follows the rules to the letter. Sitting in their cubicles fervently deleting posts, they think their work is supremely important, sacred beyond measure. Liu Lipeng wants to stand in the middle of the room and shout: why the hell are you so excited? It’s just a 2,000 yuan-a-month job. Is it worthwhile? Is this worth it?

It’s not worth it, it’s worthless, and devoid of a sense of achievement. And it’s exhausting. The day shift is 11 hours and the nightshift is longer—13 hours. During the breaks, most of the censors sneak away to smoke and chat in the stairwell. Liu Lipeng doesn’t smoke and has nothing in common with the others to gossip about. Bored stiff, he logs on to a VPN service to circumvent the Great Internet Firewall of China and uses Google Earth to wander streets in unfamiliar cities, fantasising about the people there and their lives.

He often logs on to the Weibo webpage, not as a censor but as an ordinary user. On Weibo, his username is ‘Ordinary Fascist’ (普通法西斯). It’s a satirical name but Liu Lipeng is unsure whom it satirises.

Hardly any of the censors ever use Weibo themselves, and Liu Lipeng never tells his colleagues that he does. It would never occur to them that Liu has so much to say on Weibo and posts so much ‘unhealthy’ and ‘inappropriate’, let alone ‘illegal’ and ‘reactionary’, content. Liu never gets into trouble.

Liu Lipeng is responsible for posts made during the tenth to the fourteenth minute of every hour, and he must examine the content of all the ordinary users’ posts made during that time slot. Some of Ordinary Fascist’s posts are published during that four-minute time slot and some are not. It is not by design, but Liu is certain that if his colleagues were to examine his posts made outside that time slot there wouldn’t be any problems. He knows all the sensitive words that are flagged and how to avoid them. In these days Weibo posts are limited to 140 characters—that will change only later—and he resorts to all kinds of ruses to ridicule the Communist Party and mock

the government. He employs sensitive words, but the censors ignore them because they are too busy looking for words flagged orange or red. Without those coloured flags, the censors pay no attention.

About April 2014, the Chinese Government begins to purge influential Weibo users, the so-called Big V accounts. A journalist at the *Liberation Army Daily* (解放军报) is so impassioned that he publishes a post on Weibo calling all Big Vs vermin who must be dealt with severely. A few minutes later, Ordinary Fascist posts an extremely vulgar comment that essentially suggests the journalist should engage in frenzied sexual congress with his mother. This post generates even more comments and reposts. Many find the abuse gratifying, but none knows that the author is a censor. They also don't know that in 2013 this type of filthy abuse is safe and legal, and no censor will take a second look. In other words, at a time when the Chinese Government does not want people to discuss freedom and democracy, it is more than willing to assent to crude cursing.

Ordinary Fascist is tasked to follow more than 300 Weibo users, mostly Big Vs, the majority of whom dare to criticise the Communist Party. In the official view, they are 'factors of instability' and thus dangerous elements. Among them are journalists, professors, lawyers, and even an occasional star of the big and small screens—people brave enough to occasionally criticise the political system. Although most of their posts are tactful and restrained, likening the government to a violent husband or a pissant punk blowing their own trumpet, few realise that they are witnessing the pinnacle of freedom of speech in communist China, the golden age for a generation.

In Chinese, there is an expression that describes the ability to get one's way through indirect means: 'Pointing at the mulberry tree to curse the locust tree' (指桑罵槐). Yet, no matter how tactful, restrained, and oblique the criticism, the Communist Party still deeply detests it. A lot of content is deleted and accounts on Ordinary Fascist's watchlist frequently disappear for no apparent reason. These people are banned from posting, their accounts are shut, and some of the individuals behind them are even arrested by the police.

Liu Lipeng appreciates and sympathises with these people. He uses his powers to furtively play some dirty tricks, which in his words is 'engaging

in anti-censorship work' (做一點反審查的事) to lift the bans on frozen accounts and salvage deleted or hidden posts. He occasionally feels guilty for violating workplace ethics but quickly concludes that it's like 'two negatives make a positive in mathematics. It's immoral work, so violating immorality is moral.'

Years later, Jenny Ho* still remembers Liu Lipeng's help restoring her frozen account. She's from Hong Kong and in 2013 publishes several posts about the Hong Kong protests. She is then banned and for several weeks cannot post anything. This is when the Weibo 'Reincarnation Party' (轉世黨) is born. When an account is frozen and there is no way to restore it, the only option is to register a new account. This is called reincarnation. Just as Jenny prepares to reincarnate, Liu Lipeng sends her an email telling her he has surreptitiously unblocked her account. 'I didn't know him, but he helped me a lot,' says Jenny. 'I often wonder, what sort of person is that? Why would he risk doing that?'

From Liu Lipeng's point of view, there was no danger: 'If discovered, I might get a dressing down or lose a few points on my performance evaluation. The worst possible outcome would be termination, which was no big deal because I had already decided to quit.'

At this point, Liu Lipeng has just turned thirty. He has a childish face, though a few grey hairs have appeared prematurely. He is also unrealistically optimistic. His violation of workplace ethics is far more dangerous than he imagines. And even more dangerous is his collecting of Weibo censorship files. The most significant files are the censors' 'shift handover files' (交班檔案) because they record the orders from superiors when a new sensitive incident occurs, when a new sensitive individual's name or a sensitive word is added to the forbidden word list, and when instructions are issued on how to employ more efficiently the four lethal weapons available: 'delete, hide, stop, and make private.' Liu Lipeng doesn't know why he is collecting those files other than his belief that they are important: 'They are a part of contemporary history.'

Contrary to what most people imagine, the censors' files are not regulated or well organised. They are replete with typos and ungrammatical sentences. Some are extremely boorish: 'If found out, fire immediately.' 'Just delete the porn, don't hoard. If it happens again, violators will be heavily fined.' Some are very

frank and read like a harsh parent lecturing an errant child. A file dated 6 May 2013, for example, reads: 'If unrelated to politics and pornography, do not casually handle. Hands off and just follow procedure.'

Liu Lipeng has just turned in his application to resign from the job when he sees that item. He feels greatly relieved. 'At last,' he thinks, 'I can finally leave this shithole.'

Five days later, as Liu Lipeng is completing his resignation paperwork, he logs on to the Weibo back-end management page. He notices that one of the Big V accounts he follows, that of author Murong Xuecun, is cancelled.

Me

I am that Murong Xuecun.

It is 2013 and I am a best-selling author and a verified Weibo user with a small blue capital V after my name, which is why Big Vs are known as such.

In a little over two years, I publish more than 1,800 posts on Weibo. Many of these posts criticise or ridicule the Communist Party. They are wildly popular, generating countless comments and reposts. I am frequently praised for my bravery, but upon reflection, my indirect criticism and mockery—the 'pointing at the mulberry tree to curse the locust tree'—is not true bravery. Everything I say is permissible. Everything I publish is also permitted. At most, I hit a few line balls. In this, I am no different to many public intellectuals of this time who never point at the elephant in the room and call for an end to Communist Party rule. Of course, should I say things like that, my account would be immediately cancelled and I would probably be disappeared.

By May 2013, I have close to four million followers on Weibo. Such accounts are not handled by Liu Lipeng. Weibo allocates a personal censor, known as a Weibo gatekeeper. Mine is Jia Jia*. Whenever I write inappropriate content, she phones me. 'Mr Mu, that post of yours won't do. I deleted it for you.' Sometimes she tells me the names of people and the events that cannot be mentioned, so I can detour around the forbidden zone. 'We don't need to get into direct conflict with them, right?'

She says 'we', not 'you'. When she refers to such matters, she speaks softly, her tone suggesting that this is a consultation, as though she were a sister or a close friend. I never meet Jia Jia but I feel obliged to say, I quite like her work style. Yes, she is a censor, yet she is so gentle in her work, so considerate, not lacking in human warmth. In China, censors like her are rare and precious.

I don't know why my account is cancelled and no-one tells me the reason. Jia Jia won't tell me.

Xi Jinping has just ascended to power and hasn't yet revealed his true intentions. Many people still place high hopes on him. They think he will take China on the path to democracy. Soon, however, an internal document called 'Seven Things Not to Talk About' (七不讲) breaks their hearts. This document clearly shows Xi's aspirations. It prohibits tertiary instructors from discussing seven topics in class: universal values, freedom of the press, civil society, civil rights, historical mistakes of the Communist Party, powerful bourgeoisie, and judicial independence.

The day the document is leaked, I have a busy schedule. I give a public lecture at a library and then rush to a gathering. In the car on the way to this meeting, I write a short comment on Weibo. I suggest that the 'Seven Things Not to Talk About' is just one thing: culture is prohibited.

The gathering is in a fancy restaurant in the centre of Beijing. There are a dozen or so of us—professors, lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists. We drink a few bottles of wine, eat some expensive dishes, and discuss the future of China. At this time, many are confident the Communist Party's rule cannot possibly last much longer. China will have a bright future. 'The sky will soon be light,' a professor says to me. 'We will definitely see it.'

None of the participants foresees that, in 10 years, half the people around the table will be in jail. Some, like me, will be living in exile. Those still in Beijing will have long been silenced and will not utter a word. The optimism that we share at this distinguished gathering will feel illusory and distant, like a fleeting dream.

On the way home from the get-together, I receive a message from a friend whose Weibo account was closed yesterday. In these days, I, like most Weibo users, consider account banning a serious matter, so

I publish a harshly worded question on Weibo: ‘Who gave you the right to arbitrarily deprive citizens of their freedom of speech?’

The Cyberspace Administration of China is the premier censorship agency in China. The newly appointed boss, Lu Wei, popularly known as the ‘internet czar’, begins to implement a series of severe purges of online speech. In the following days, countless accounts are cancelled, and many people are thrown behind bars for what they wrote online.

But that’s just guesswork. In China, there’s no need for a good reason to block someone’s account for a violation of an imaginary ‘relevant regulation’ that no-one can explain clearly. A powerful government agency can simply issue an order to make a person disappear from public life.

Retribution is swift. Within 20 minutes of this posting, my account is cancelled.

Many people feel my treatment is unfair. They light virtual candles for me and hold ‘memorial services’. Some even announce they will cease using Weibo in protest. Many begin to quote my ‘before-death’ writings. In a dozen hours, there are many such posts and my name tops the search engine rankings.

My Weibo gatekeeper, Jia Jia, the gentle censor, telephones me and, though apologetic, she, too, thinks I should be a little more careful. ‘There’s no need for you to get into direct conflict with them, don’t you think?’

Perhaps this time she does not say ‘we’ because the situation has already changed. She declines to tell me which agency issued the order, only referring

to ‘higher levels’. But higher levels could be any one of several agencies: the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Propaganda Department, the Public Security Bureau, or a senior official’s private secretary. If they feel the need, they can order a Weibo post deleted, or an account closed. Such orders are never questioned.

I hope that in consideration of our close relationship Jia Jia will tell me the details, but she responds: ‘I’m sorry, Mr Mu, I really cannot reveal this. You know we sign non-disclosure agreements. Please show me some empathy. I have a life too, right?’

It’s my last telephone conversation with Jia Jia. I then register multiple accounts, but each one is cancelled. I imagine Jia Jia is aware of this, but she does not contact me.

The next day, around dusk, my friend Yu Dayou* calls to tell me he received an email from a stranger. The email is about me and he forwards it. It is just one line: ‘Please forward to Murong Xuecun.’ There are two attached images. They are screenshots of the Weibo management page that contain detailed information about my account: time of registration, IP address, my mobile phone number, the reason for the deletion of each of my posts and the blocking of my account, as well as the answer to the question I pestered Jia Jia about: which agency and who ordered my account cancelled.

提示	
用户名(通行证):	hawking099
UID:	1182415487
昵称:	慕容雪村 (VIP用户 封杀用户)
个性域名:	http://weibo.com/hawking
绑定手机号:	查看手机号
关联博客:	http://blog.sina.com.cn/hawking
微博注册时间:	2009-08-28 16:14:24(通行证时间2005-09-20 17:06:35)
微博注册IP:	0.0.4.246 查看同IP用户
关注数:	1099
粉丝数:	3977998
微博数:	1880
最后一条微博:	不知道为何注销, 也不知为何恢复, 这就是一个不知为何之国。感谢注销期间各位朋友的仗义声援。另外, 除已被注销的 @平原东方朔 外, 其它账号均与本人无关。 (ip:59.152.251.106) 微博页
最后一条评论:	暂无

标签			
用户类型	操作时间	处理理由	操作人
-	2013-01-11 19:20:20	孙业斌	yecheng
-	2013-01-11 19:58:09	魏佳要求 孙业斌	yecheng
-	2013-01-13 13:08:43	郑斌要求	junyong
负责人 监控	2013-01-14 16:57:44	费凡要求 统一操作 雷小雷 操作理由 孙业斌	xiaolei4

用户限制					
限制类型	状态	操作时间	到期时间	处理理由	操作人
发微博	禁止发表	2013-01-10 18:05:01	2013-01-10 18:05:01	时间过期取消	system
发私信	禁止发送	2013-01-10 18:05:01	2013-01-10 18:05:01	时间过期取消	system
发评论	禁止发表	2013-01-10 18:05:01	2013-01-10 18:05:01	时间过期取消	system

用户状态			
状态	时间	操作人	操作理由
封杀用户	2013-05-18 00:26:22	yunbo	网管办要求 已报老范同意 周运波
普通用户	2013-05-17 13:32:21	rujie	老范要求解开 次杰
封杀用户	2013-05-11 21:55:27	qianfeng	国新办转彭部长要求 钱锋
全禁止	2013-01-07 18:01:54	qiannan	网管办要求 发布南周现场图片 禁

Figure 1: The two screenshots that were sent to the author. Source: Murong Xuecun's X account (screenshot 1 and screenshot 2).

Liu Lipeng

It is Liu Lipeng's last day at Sina Weibo. The handover is complete and his possessions are packed. He just needs to endure a few more hours and he can leave that putrid place forever.

Liu Lipeng does not know me and has not read my books. He has read a few of my posts in his role as a censor, but they don't leave a deep impression: 'Just another public intellectual in an era full of public intellectuals, perhaps a relatively important one.' He sees the momentous memorial for my Weibo account and then goes out of his way to look at the Weibo administrative page. At first, he doesn't think much about it, but gradually an idea forms in his mind. Perhaps he can do something.

Liu Lipeng rarely talks with others about his work because censors operate in a semi-clandestine environment. Liu describes it as 'shameful and dirty work'. For a long time, even the people closest to him don't know what he does for a living. 'Computer work, eh? So, you can repair computers?' a relative once asked.

Liu Lipeng can in fact repair computers and even possesses a few hacking skills. He is an expert at concealing his online footprints. He considers rescuing the Murong Xuecun Weibo account but the order to cancel it has come from a very high level, so it is impossible to quietly reactivate it like other accounts, without anyone noticing.

Liu Lipeng has signed the same censors' non-disclosure agreement as Jia Jia, though he is determined to violate it. When no-one notices, he furtively copies two screenshots on to his own flash drive. He knows the value of the two images, but he can't send them directly; he must find a 'transit hub'.

Liu Lipeng finds Yu Dayou in the list of Murong Xuecun's followers. Yu is a not particularly successful businessman, and his words and actions never overstep the boundaries. Liu assesses that Yu will escape notice. Liu spends a little time reviewing Murong's communication records to determine that Murong and Yu are in contact with each other. This is the one, Liu tells himself.

The time to leave arrives. Liu Lipeng carries his scant belongings out of that grey skyscraper and walks a few hundred metres along the ancient Grand Canal that connects Beijing to Hangzhou, pondering

whether to do it. Discovery certainly means arrest and possibly a prison sentence. How long? Two years? Three years? At most three years, no longer.

He walks into an internet bar, finds a secluded seat, and registers a new email account with the username 'Nameless'. He likes that name.

He sends the two images to Yu Dayou and adds a one-sentence message. After sending the email, he sits silently in front of the computer for a while, recalling the three years of his life as a censor. He thinks about his family and Alice*. In a few days, he will marry Alice, a very simple girl who is totally indifferent to politics. She probably will not understand the significance of what he has just done. Best not tell her, to avoid making her worry.

After 40 minutes, Yu Dayou replies: 'The friend asks, can this be made public?'

Liu Lipeng has already thought this through. As soon as 'the friend' publishes the two images, Sina Weibo will definitely try to track down the leaker. They may make a police report. Liu hesitates. He considers the number of people who have access to that page, at least three or four hundred. They would not necessarily suspect him.

'Okay to make public,' Liu replies. 'In any case, they are unlikely to find me.'

He logs out of the email account and erases his browsing history. He then checks again to be sure he has not left any traces before he is confident enough to stand up. There are a lot of youths playing video games all around. They are engrossed with their computer screens and yell out chaotically. None of them notices him. Liu Lipeng silently walks out of the internet bar, head lowered. It will soon be dark. He brushes his sleeves as though flicking off three years of grime. He walks quickly to merge with the people strolling at dusk.

Me

The two screenshots Nameless sends me contain many names: Weibo Censors Sun Yacheng, Jia Fan, and Lei Xiaolei; some censorship managers, as well as a certain Qian Feng, who cancelled my account. And then there is Old Mr Chen, the editor-in-chief of Weibo. He was once my friend, but our friendship ends here. In the following days, we do not meet face

to face and exchange no greetings. In his eyes, I must have become a ‘sensitive element’, like a pathogen to be avoided. I understand his circumstances and apologise for causing him so much trouble.

The ‘Minister Peng’ in the screenshot is the key protagonist: Peng Bo. He has just been promoted to vice-ministerial rank, becoming a member of China’s privileged class, the lawless *nomenklatura*. He delivers speeches at meetings claiming he will ‘thoroughly cleanse cyberspace’. That is, he will eliminate all voices detrimental to the party, which is the reason he issues the order to cancel all my social media accounts. Minister Peng has a shiny, balding crown and a broad mouth. His mien is dignified and wise. It takes me some time to uncover his identity. I then write a magniloquent essay calling him a power player hiding behind the shield of darkness.¹ In it, I write: ‘I believe you will not be able to hide in the shadows forever because the light of a new dawn will also expose the place where you are hiding. Dear Nameless Censor, when that time comes, the whole world will know who you are.’

One afternoon two months later, I cannot restrain myself any longer: I use a newly registered account to write a threatening post to Peng Bo on Weibo. In it, I say: if my account is cancelled again, I will deploy all my resources to investigate your corrupt deeds and make them public. ‘The day this account is cancelled, is also the day you will be jailed. Don’t say you weren’t warned.’

These words are not me firing blindly in the dark. Before his promotion, Peng Bo was a journalist, an editor, and a publisher. We have many mutual acquaintances and friends and, despite the constant refrain of words such as ‘honest’ and ‘upstanding’ on his lips, many people suspect that he is corrupt and licentious. Common sense suggests that a high official with as much power as Peng Bo would not be as honest and upright as he claims to be.

Perhaps that is why Peng Bo is apprehensive about dealing with my threat. After about a month, my new Weibo account is cancelled. It’s around midnight. I have just returned to my apartment when I receive a call from the editor-in-chief of Sina Weibo, my erstwhile friend, the Old Mr Chen in the screenshots. He sounds very nervous. He says the order to cancel my account comes from an organisation and has nothing to do with Peng Bo. He admonishes me ‘not to be used by others’, that is, Peng’s political enemies.

‘Peng Bo began his career as a journalist. He’s the same as the two of us. We’re all the same,’ says Old Mr Chen. ‘Moreover, when he cancelled your account last time it was not of his own volition. He was following orders so don’t fuck with him, ok?’ Mr Chen then suggests I meet with Peng Bo for a chat. ‘Now, just the three of us. We’ll go somewhere for a drink and talk about this, ok?’

During the next two hours I receive six phone calls like that from Old Mr Chen at Peng Bo’s instigation. Apart from Old Mr Chen, a mutual friend calls to say something along the lines of: ‘Don’t fuck with him. Starting a vendetta will not be good for you.’ I ignore them all. I begin to draft a public announcement offering a 200,000-yuan reward for evidence of Peng Bo’s corruption. And then Yu Dayou telephones: ‘If you keep this up, Peng Bo will be very dangerous. If you can’t beat him, the guy who gave you the tip-off will be in deep trouble. He helped you out of the goodness of his heart, so you can’t implicate him’.

Me and My Censor

Liu Lipeng knows nothing of this. He does not read my essay and does not know about my war with Peng Bo. In the summer of 2013, he marries Alice and holds a reception at a fancy restaurant in Tianjin. There is a throng of well-wishers, relatives, and friends. Liu Lipeng drinks a lot of alcohol. He occasionally thinks of his former career as a censor, which still makes him feel nauseated.

After the wedding, a relative introduces Liu to a temporary job in a state-owned enterprise. The job ‘was neither happy nor unhappy, just average’. Alice is carrying their first child. To earn better remuneration, Liu Lipeng job-hops to Leshi Internet Information and Technology, a streaming service like Netflix, where he is a quality control manager. The work has no connection to censorship, but he works alongside censors. Every day he sees censorship orders emanating from the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the Cyberspace Administration of China, as well as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. Some of the orders are unbelievable. One variety show compere says he almost ‘died laughing’. The word ‘died’ must be put inside double quotation

marks, otherwise it is a breach of regulations. It's as though viewers are considered not intelligent enough to understand an extremely simple phrase.

'For reasons that cannot be divulged,' says Liu Lipeng jovially, 'I begin to collate those orders.' He sets up six VPN accounts overseas and copies censorship orders page by page, then uploads them to cloud servers outside China's Great Firewall. In four years, he collects a total of more than one million Chinese characters in censorship directives. He comes to believe the material is extraordinarily significant. He secretly vows that one day he will release it to the public: 'That way everyone will see how this evil system works, it will be like exposing an evil fraud.'

He knows this is a dangerous undertaking, so he never tells Alice because she'll be scared out of her wits if she knows. As the censorship file grows, he becomes more and more nervous. He has no illusions that what he is doing is more than enough for a three-year jail sentence at minimum. Five or six years is entirely possible, and eight or ten years is not impossible. His son has just begun to walk, and his daughter has just been born. If the police drag him away, the family will be destroyed.

Liu Lipeng stays quiet and the burden of keeping his own counsel is great. He refrains from making new friends and doesn't share his true feelings with anyone. He walks around with his head lowered out of fear of attracting attention. In a city of 15 million people, not a single person knows that he is engaged in dangerous work.

By now I have vanished from public life in China; my books cannot be sold, my essays cannot be published. I live in isolation in a small apartment in Beijing, just 150 kilometres from Liu Lipeng in Tianjin. I frequently have money worries and I frequently think about Nameless. What sort of person are they? Why take such an enormous risk to disclose sensitive information to me? I often wonder whether Jia Jia, my soft-spoken censor, had taken the risk to provide me with the information. Yu Dayou and I agree that whoever they were, that person is extraordinary. 'If this riddle is ever solved,' says Yu, 'I will definitely treat that person to a good meal.' I, too, want to say respectfully: 'Thank you. Thank you for everything you did in that nameless era.'

In that nameless era, Peng Bo's political career progresses smoothly. He is constantly on TV and quoted in newspapers. He hosts meetings and

publishes speeches that call for people to 'study well, publicise well, and implement well the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important speeches' and to 'raise the public's awareness of reporting on people and consciously cleaning up harmful information online'. His power grows: in addition to managing public opinion on the internet, he is also responsible for the 'prevention of and dealing with cults'. That is, the repression of and attacks upon faith communities, resulting in blood and tears. My religious friends are beaten and arrested, possibly based on a piece of paper Peng Bo issues, resulting in their abject misery. In 2018, Peng Bo becomes a professor of journalism at China's most important university, Peking University. In the classroom, he tells students: 'I'm not an official, I'm just a foot soldier on the line of fire.'

Time flies and I don't know how I manage to survive. Liu Lipeng feels the same. He feels as though he were in a dream, the years flying by.

At the end of 2019 and in early 2020, Covid-19 spreads. First, in Wuhan, and then to the whole world. In a matter of months, several million people lose their lives. In China, Xi Jinping pushes his savage and cruel Covid policies that transform the country into a huge prison. At the slightest pretext, cities with populations in the millions are completely locked down. No-one can leave their homes without permission, even to purchase food. This applies also to people with urgent medical conditions or pregnant women about to go into labour.

Liu Lipeng decides to leave China because he can't take any more of living like a prisoner. He's even more concerned about the censorship materials he has collected. The Chinese Government begins to deploy QR codes to control the lives of Chinese people. Tracking codes, venue codes, health codes—all become virtual handcuffs. No matter where you go, QR codes must be scanned and reported to the government to detail your movements and location. One little error and you are subject to searches or even imprisonment. 'If they look through my mobile phone, I'll be finished,' Liu Lipeng thinks. 'I have to leave immediately.'

But there are hardly any flights. Tianjin airport is closed. He takes Alice and their two children to Beijing and catches one of the last planes to Los Angeles. Once the plane is in the air, he is finally able



Figure 2: Peng Bo at his trial in December 2023.
Source: Screenshot from CCTV 13 via Weibo.

to relax, even though he wonders whether he will ever be able to return to China. Later, he would tell me: 'It was like a desperate escape from a house on fire.'

About the same time, I purchase a train ticket and sneak into Wuhan, which is still under lockdown. I stay a month in the city interviewing people about their experiences during the lockdown, then hide in a hotel in the mountains of southwestern China, where I spend the next several months writing *Deadly Quiet City: True Stories from Wuhan*. When the book is about to be published, I carry a single suitcase to make it look like I'm taking a short trip. I tremble with fear as I am leaving China. Until the moment I clear customs, I'm uncertain whether the government will permit this 'sensitive element' to leave China. Once on the plane, just like Liu one year earlier, I realise that I may never be able to return to my country again.

By this time, Peng Bo is suspended from his job and under investigation. This means his government career is over. According to official reports, this 'foot soldier on the line of fire' has taken bribes totalling 54,640,000 yuan. People in China know that bribery is not his only crime, and perhaps not his most serious. High officials like Peng Bo have immunity from prosecution on corruption and bribery charges. Punishment is due to siding with the wrong faction or insufficient political loyalty. Despite his constant studying, publicising, and implementation of the spirit of Xi Jinping, it appears that Xi still felt Peng was insufficiently loyal. The figure of the bribes he

accepted is interesting, too. When he oversaw censorship, he would probably personally excise the number 64 or order someone to excise it.

Meanwhile, Liu Lipeng is enjoying his American life. The day they arrive in Los Angeles, his family eats at In-N-Out Burgers. He likes it so much that he will make a tradition of going to this restaurant every year on this date to buy a few burgers, a big bag of fries, and cups of soda. Every time, they raise their cups to commemorate their free lives.

'I've been here for several years now, but I am still astounded at how blue the sky is. I lived in China for a long time, but I never saw such a blue sky.'

One day, Liu sends me a direct message on Twitter. He is excessively polite. He writes: 'Mr Murong, please forgive me for presumptuously disturbing you', before asking whether I remember the email sent via Yu Dayou with the two screenshots. As if by telepathy, I instantly see the images. My heart is pounding. I say: 'Yes, I remember that. I wondered who sent that email. I am most grateful.'

We have a long phone call like long-lost friends. We describe everything we've done since leaving China. 'I wish to testify that although I was a Weibo censor, I am not a bad person.'

I reply: 'I will speak on your behalf.'

Many publications report on Liu Lipeng. He is praised for being like the secret agent in the film *The Lives of Others* or a North Korean refugee. He eagerly takes a job at *China Digital Times*, where he works on editing the censorship files he collected. They are

published one by one, making them freely available to anyone who wants to read them to gain insight into just how evil is the system in which he used to work. 'I used to be a censor, but now I'm engaged in anti-censorship work,' Liu Lipeng tells me. 'It really is like a dream.'

My book on the Wuhan lockdown is now published in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Liu and I agree to get together one day in the future, either in Australia or the United States. We will toast to our freedom and everything he did in that nameless era.

In my homeland, high-security prisons hold many of my friends: lawyers, journalists, priests who are suffering interminably. Now Peng Bo joins their ranks. On 23 December 2021, he makes his final public appearance on TV at his trial. He wears a navy-blue Mao suit and thick, black-framed glasses as he stands impassively in the dock. Official reports say he has committed many crimes, including a 'collapse of

ideals and beliefs', 'disloyalty to the party', 'engaging in superstitious practices', 'violations of the rules against attending private clubs', as well as accepting bribes for a total amount that includes the inauspicious number '64'. He is sentenced to 14 years in jail. Peng Bo declares to the court that he accepts the verdict and will not appeal.

He no doubt is aware that appealing will not change anything. For the regime he once served, the law is unimportant. One word of a leader decides one's fate, just as when he was a leader eight years earlier and a single command of his extinguished all my social media accounts.

State TV devotes barely two minutes to reporting Peng Bo's case. There are many close-ups of this 64-year-old former high official, former professor, and former 'foot soldier on the line of fire' framed between two towering police officers, making him appear weak and in his dotage. His remaining hair is completely white. ■

1 The essay was published in Chinese under the title '致黑暗中的弄权者'[To the Powerful Ones in the Darkness], 纽约时报中文网 [New York Times Chinese], 20 May 2013, cn.nytimes.com/culture/20130520/cc20murong; for the English translation cited in the text see 'An Open Letter to a Nameless Censor', in *China Story Yearbook 2023: Civilising China*, edited by Geremie R. Barmé and Jeremy Goldkorn, pp. 355–61, ANU Press, Canberra.



The Tibet-Aid Project and Settler Colonialism in China's Borderlands

Tibet. Source: Gunther Hagleitner (CC), Flickr.com.

James LEIBOLD

This essay examines the expansion of the Tibet-Aid Project in Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'New Era' of Han-centric nationalism and explores how the project facilitates Han settler colonialism in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It argues that the Chinese Communist Party views the Tibetan Plateau as a sort of 'final frontier', where the heroic 'Han man's burden' of bringing civilisation and progress into this far corner of the People's Republic of China remains incomplete but well under way.

This year marks 30 years since China launched its ambitious Tibet-Aid Project (援藏计划), a vast and ongoing party-state effort to reshape the region. Unveiled at the 1994 Tibet Work Forum, the scheme pairs Tibet's administrative units with inland provinces, cities, and state-owned enterprises, injecting Han Chinese expertise, resources, and capital into the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). The goal, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tell us, is to drive rapid development while ensuring long-term stability (Yang 2024). But the project is also a key element of Beijing's settler-colonial enterprise, aimed at fortifying Han dominance at the expense of indigenous minorities such as the Tibetans.



President Xi Jinping in Lhasa for the seventieth anniversary of the 'Peaceful Liberation of Tibet', 22 July 2021. Source: Qiushiwang.

Under President Xi Jinping, the CCP has greatly expanded the scope of Tibet-Aid. Xi has repeatedly praised the 'old Tibet spirit' (老西藏精神), in which successive generations of Han colonists sacrifice their personal comfort to plant roots on the harsh plateau and struggle hard (Xinhua 2015). This recalls the heroic efforts of the 18th Army Group of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), who marched into Tibet during the 1950s to assert Han control over the region. Yet, this mission is incomplete. The TAR is one of the only parts of the People's Republic of China where the Han still represent a significant minority of the population (the other being southern Xinjiang).

Amid the propaganda for the thirtieth anniversary celebrations, a Han saviour complex emerges, reminiscent of settler-colonial projects throughout history. Tibetans, like Indigenous Australians or Native Americans, are portrayed as indolent residents of a resource-rich land who lack the ability to unlock its potential. That task falls to the more capable Han people. And this 'Han man's burden' is one of not only mettle and self-sacrifice but also hardship, illness,

and even death. Yang Miaoyan (2020) notes that Han officials involved in aiding Tibet often struggle with balancing altruism and self-interest.

In this essay, I briefly examine the flawed hero complex driving the Tibet-Aid Project and argue that, despite its limitations, Xi Jinping remains resolute in completing what Emily Yeh (2013) labelled the 'taming of Tibet'. By unleashing a new legion of Han officials and settlers on to the Tibetan Plateau, Xi seeks to complete the discursive, demographic, and cultural integration of Tibet into a new Han empire.

The Hazards of Aiding Tibet

Following the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping sought to unlock the entrepreneurial potential of the Chinese people by reducing the CCP's involvement in their daily lives. In Tibet and other frontier regions, the party initially reiterated its promise of autonomy, even withdrawing Han officials and settlers for a time (Li 2019). However, the resurgence of unrest and the twin shocks of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising and 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union prompted a strategic pivot. At the Third Tibet Work Forum in 1994, then premier Li Peng claimed Tibet's capacity for self-development was limited, necessitating prolonged state intervention (News of the Communist Party of China n.d.).

Through 'counterpart assistance' and the 'regular rotation' of Han officials, the party aimed not only to suppress separatist sentiments linked to the exiled Dalai Lama but also to drive 'leap-frog development'. In June 1995, the first 'batch' of 622 Han cadres began their assignments in the TAR, assuming key roles as county party secretaries, heads of industry, and school principals (Jin 2010: 170–78). The goal, according to an internal speech on the spirit of the Third Forum, was a 'permanent contingent of [Han] cadres in Tibet' (Barnett 1996). However, the term of service for 'Tibet-Aid cadres' (援藏干部) was capped at three years due to low enthusiasm, as it was generally regarded as an unwelcome, and potentially perilous, assignment—for instance, Barnett (1996: n.70) mentions the firing of one Han vice-mayor, who refused to serve in Tibet.



Xu Xiaozhu (foreground) in Mêdog County conducting road survey work, date unknown. Source: NSCAGE.

In CCP propaganda, Tibet-Aid cadres are celebrated as a new generation of ‘constructors’ (建设者)—a noble class of pioneers, colonists, and engineers committed to transforming the physical and human ‘wasteland’ while securing the nation’s borders and bringing ‘civilisation’ to the borderlands (Cliff 2016b: 27–49). Only the strongest of constructors can endure the unique and challenging geography of the Tibetan Plateau. Take, for example, 35-year-old Guangzhou resident Xu Xiaozhu (许晓珠), who volunteered for the Tibet-Aid Project in 2004 and was assigned deputy party secretary of remote Mêdog County (墨脱县) on the highly securitised border with India (CCTV 2007).

At the time, Mêdog was a poverty-stricken county cut off from the rest of China, with only a single dirt track running through some of the world’s steepest canyons in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River. In charge of transportation, Mr Xu was said to have

climbed over snow-capped mountains, through dense forests, up cliffs, over cliffs, through areas infested with leeches and poisonous snakes. Braving the dangers of avalanches and land-

slides, he ignored the effects of altitude sickness such as oxygen deficiency, dizziness, and insomnia. (CCTV 2007)

His mission: convince his superiors in Lhasa, Guangdong, and Beijing to construct a bitumen highway connecting Mêdog with the rest of China. As a selfless servant of the party and the nation, Xu endured his longing for his wife and children at home, including his daughter born with cerebral palsy. The much-celebrated 100-kilometre Bomê to Mêdog Highway was eventually completed in 2013, with Xu receiving the National May First Labour Medal and other rewards for his valiant service.

As part of the thirtieth anniversary celebrations, Xu Xiaozhu triumphantly returned to Mêdog this year, navigating the ‘heavenly highway’ in an off-road vehicle. He completed the journey to the county seat in just four and a half hours—an impressive feat compared with the arduous five-day trek he braved on foot at the start of his service. State media claimed that thanks to the dedicated efforts of generations of Tibet-Aid cadres, the ‘long-suffering’ natives of Mêdog have finally entered the ‘fast lane of development’. They now enjoy improved infrastructure, including new roads, schools, medical facilities, communication towers, and livelihood projects, such as tea plantations and orchards (Fu 2024).

Despite the official narrative, Tibet-Aid cadres are widely resented among Tibetans, especially when compared with earlier generations of Han officials who tried to learn the local languages and integrate into Tibetan society (Yeh 2013: 102; Zhao 2021: 949–52; Wang 2004). The model worker Kong Fansen (孔繁森), known as the ‘people’s servant’ (人民服务员), is the benchmark; celebrated in films, books, and museums, he dedicated nearly a decade to construction in Tibet during the 1970s and 1980s before tragically dying in a traffic accident while on duty (The Paper 2024c). In comparison, most Tibetans deride the new wave of Tibet-Aid cadres, labelling them ‘eat-Tibet cadres’ (吃藏干部) or ‘migratory birds’ (候鸟), for prioritising personal welfare, vanity projects, and career advancement over the provision of genuine assistance (Yang 2019: 103).

The CCP celebrates figures like Kang Fansen and Xu Xiaozhu as symbols of national sacrifice because most Han people view Tibet as backwards, dangerous, and corrupt, and thus unsuitable for Han settlement.



Kong Fansen tutoring a Tibetan child in reading Chinese while working in Tibet, date unknown.
Source: Baidu.

Although nearly 40 million Han tourists flocked to the region in 2023 (Xinhua 2023a), drawn by thrills and mysticism, the tourism industry's exoticised portrayal of the region lures Han, yet ultimately dissuades them from putting down roots in its harsh environment. In their analysis of Han sojourners in Tibet, Qian and Zhu (2016: 419) argue they navigate 'the restless transformation of Tibet in profoundly ambiguous and contradictory ways'.

Chinese social media frequently emphasises the physical discomforts and health risks associated with extended time on the plateau. Han colonists face a range of health issues, including high blood pressure, gout, diarrhoea, depression, chronic insomnia, and poor diet. They also experience noticeable changes in their physical appearance—what is called 'plateau redness' (高原红), due to exposure to the dry air and strong ultraviolet rays at high altitudes (Xinhua 2019; Whitefield-Madrano 2016).

There are frequent WeChat posts about the heartbreaking death of Tibet-Aid cadres due to traffic accidents, altitude sickness, or overwork. In the mid-2010s, Tibet-Aid worker Zhang Yingxiu (张英秀) was told to expect several deaths in her group of Anhui teachers and wrote about her fear of 'not surviving but rather ending up sleeping for eternity at the foot of Mount Gongbori' as she counted down

the days to her return home (Zhang 2016). Others fail to adapt socially. Feeling lonely, bored, and afraid, one young Han teacher working in a remote Tibetan village remarked: 'I do not feel I belong here and I really feel that I have no gains by taking this job' (Wang 2018: 44).

While state media seeks to inspire Han settlers to sacrifice themselves for the nation, social media posts amplify anxieties about the pitfalls of working in Tibet. One irrigation cadre remarked in 2019 that, 'due to their physiological structure, Han Chinese comrades cannot adapt to life at high altitudes' (China Water Resources 2019). Living conditions present significant challenges, but the notoriously corrupt local politics can also ensnare outsiders. Take the tragic fate of Luo Huaibin (罗怀斌), a 54-year-old Tibet-Aid cadre, who was found dead in a guest-house in Lakang Township (拉康镇) nearly 2,500 kilometres from his home in Changsha, Hunan, in 2020 (NetEase 2024).

Authorities attributed Luo's death to a heart attack—a common fate for Han cadres in Tibet. However, his widow, Zhou Meiru (周美如), alleged foul play on social media, citing the bruises on his face and body as evidence of a 'well-planned conspiracy' to murder him. She claims that, after Luo accused his boss, Yang Ning (杨宁), of corruption, Yang orchestrated his death. Four years on, Luo's body remains uncremated in a Lhasa funeral parlour while his widow fights for justice (The Paper 2024b).

Amid the thirtieth anniversary celebrations, Luo Huaibin's work unit posthumously recognised him as an 'outstanding CCP member' and granted his widow compensation. Yet, they also dismissed allegations of foul play, claiming the investigation was 'standard, open, and transparent' while cautioning against the spreading of rumours that could disrupt social harmony and stability (State Forestry and Grassland Administration Central South Institute 2024). Such incidents complicate the party's efforts to attract Han talent to serve in Tibet, let alone migrate there.

Doubling Down on Tibet-Aid

In response to these concerns, Xi Jinping has not only appealed to patriotism but also increased the incentive structures for those aiding Tibet. On a 2021 visit



Screenshots from Zhu Meiru's Douyin account, May 2024. Source: Douyin.

to Lhasa to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of its 'peaceful liberation', he praised the 'noble spirit' of Tibet-Aid by claiming 'there is no shortage of spirit' on the plateau 'despite the lack of oxygen' (Cui 2024). To help uplift this spirit, he instructed government officials to formulate a new range of 'special wage and welfare benefits' for cadres and workers in the TAR to 'support them and solve their worries'.

Alongside generous salaries (double, if not more), relocation and housing subsidies, a monthly high-altitude allowance, special food rations, paid family leave, and other benefits, aid cadres are promised rapid promotion after their term of service (these benefits are complex, with details varying depending on the dispatching and receiving work units; see Yang 2019: 107, 2020: 627; Tsai and Wang 2024: 44). Children of Tibet-Aid cadres, as well as individuals investing RMB3 million in the region, can also sit the ultra-competitive university entrance exam in the TAR, which increases their chances of gaining admission to top universities due to the region's lower entry requirements and preferential treatment for exam-takers. To sweeten the deal, the TAR Government is building a 3,000-student high school in Chengdu for the children of Tibet-Aid cadres, where they can study in comfort before sitting the exam in Lhasa (RFA 2024).

The lure of these benefits (as well as the coercive powers of the party) has contributed to the substantial expansion of the Tibet-Aid project under Xi Jinping. The number of officials being sent each rotation has quadrupled in recent years, with 2,114 sent as part of the tenth batch in 2024 (Yang 2024: 136). Nearly three-quarters of the more than 12,000 cadres dispatched since 1994 occurred under Xi's direction (Sohu 2024). These officials are taking on more significant administrative roles, with some choosing to follow Xi's advice to put down roots in Tibet, even if only temporarily. For example, Wang Qiang (王强), the new Mayor of Lhasa, originally came to the city as the leader of Beijing's Tibet-Aid team in 2019 and decided to stay after the end of his three years of service. He is now promoting outside investment in the city through a new round of preferential incentives, including a low personal tax rate, exemptions from corporate income tax, and fast-tracked approvals (The Paper 2024a).

Under President Xi, the CCP has also pioneered new forms of Tibet-Aid and Han talent recruitment. Since 2015, more than 4,000 Han teachers and doctors from across China have been sent to Tibetan schools and hospitals, with these 'group-style' (组团式) assignments typically spending from one to three years mentoring local staff (Chen and



Wu Zhenzhu (right) with her husband and two children in Nyingchi City, 2021. Source: NetEase.

Fan 2024). Other secondments are even shorter, with ‘small group’ (小组团) aid offering ‘short, fast, and effective’ assistance since 2019, which is more precisely tailored to regional needs, such as short training courses, exhibitions, and research projects (Yu 2024). In 2018, the Ministry of Education initiated the ‘ten-thousand teachers program’ (援藏援疆万名教师支教计划), aiming to train local teachers in Tibet, Qinghai, and Xinjiang by dispatching leading Han teachers and administrators to the region.

It is hoped some of these educators will remain on the frontier, like Wu Zhenzhu (吴珍珠), who volunteered for the Guangdong aid team in 2013 and was assigned deputy party secretary of the Education Department in Nyingchi City. Six years later, she volunteered again, this time bringing her husband and two young children to Nyingchi. In a recent media profile, Wu is quoted as saying: ‘Nyingchi needs me, and I need Nyingchi even more.’ The article pointed out that for Ms Wu, ‘supporting Tibet is not only about giving but also about gaining’—both as a ‘model individual’ awardee and through opportunities for her family to benefit from preferential policies and upward social mobility (Yangcheng Evening News 2021).

Over the past two decades the TAR Government has also sought to recruit thousands of Han students from the interior. Pathways include the ‘College Student Volunteer Service Program for the Western Regions’ (大学生志愿服务西部计划), which assigns university students to grassroots and remote locations for one to three years after graduation; and the ‘Tibet-Directed Student Program’ (西藏定向生), which provides up

to 500 students with a free education at top-tier universities in exchange for five years of service in the TAR on graduation. These opportunities appeal to students from poorer, inland provinces such as Sichuan, Yunnan, Qinghai, and Henan, and, according to government statistics, nearly 60 per cent remain in the TAR after their mandatory service, becoming a key part of a new ‘native’ Han cadre force (Dingxiang Xizang 2021; Brown 2023: 73–76). A recent article placed the total number of volunteers in the TAR at 11,751 over the past 20 years (Xinhua 2023b). In 2023, as part of the twentieth anniversary of the Volunteer Service Program, 1,230 students were recruited, and 7,229 (62 per cent) have volunteered since 2015 (Tianyuan Shengxue 2024; Xinhua 2023b), suggesting a similar ramping up of this program in recent years.

‘Second and Third Generation [Han] Tibetans’

Xi Jinping has repeatedly urged settlers to ‘put down roots in Tibet’ (扎根西藏) (China Youth Daily 2022). While he does not explicitly mention the Han, the very notion of root-making suggests non-indigenous migration. The Tibetans are already rooted in their homeland. Chinese state media, especially in this anniversary year, frequently profiles Han who have decided to make Tibet their home in service of the motherland and themselves.

Zhang Yinbo (张银波) is one of these pioneers. He volunteered in 2014 to escape a difficult family situation after graduating from Baoshan College in Yunnan. He first taught English in a remote township school in Gyaca County (加查县) before passing the TAR civil service exam and taking up a job with the Lhokha City Government. Deciding to ‘put down roots’ in Tibet and ‘devote his life’ to the region, he declared in a recent media interview: ‘Tibet, I’m your child ... [I]f you come to Tibet, you must become a Tibetan’ (Tibet Business Daily 2024). Han settlers like Zhang Yinbo are better placed (in terms of networks, capital, language, and cultural skills) to exploit what Tom Cliff (2016a) calls the ‘lucrative chaos’ of aid-dependent frontier regions like Xinjiang and Tibet, ultimately dispossessing the very minorities they are supposedly there to aid.



Zhang Yinbo (right) with a Tibetan woman in Yumai Township, Longzi County, July 2021. Source: WeChat.

Most of the Han people living and working in Tibet today are descendants of former Tibet-Aid cadres. In a recent survey of 300-plus Han retirees who had worked in Tibet, 49 per cent had a parent who had previously worked in Tibet, with one-quarter of those born in Tibet (Zhou and Du 2023: 83). They are called ‘second’ or ‘third-generation Tibetans’ (藏二代 or 藏三代) in Chinese and now make up the backbone of the party-state’s governing and economic apparatuses in the region. According to officials, they are the ‘strongest source of strength’ for forging what Xi Jinping has called the ‘collective consciousness’ (共同体意识) of the Han-centric nation/race (Thondup and Tsring 2023). By claiming Tibetan identity, albeit an altered one, Han migrants are engaging in a common settler-colonial strategy—what Lorenzo Veracini (2010: 46) calls the discursive erasure of ‘indigenous specific alterity’.

Han colonists live a highly fluid existence in the TAR and their roots are impermanent. Due to health concerns, they split their time between apartments in lower-elevation cities, chiefly in Sichuan, and their posts on the plateau. China’s mega-infrastructure building in the TAR—roads, airports, railways, power and telecommunication lines, etcetera—serves as conduits for Han mobility, allowing colonial subjects to move more comfortably and smoothly through ‘harsh’ Tibetan spaces while imprinting the landscape with Han norms that ultimately efface Tibetan sovereignty. The 1,629-kilometre Chengdu-to-Lhasa high-speed railway is of ‘immense strategic value’, a 2018 blog post asserts, as it will not only facilitate



Yang Guoying (right) in Lhasa with her daughter and husband, ca. 1980s. Source: WeChat.

military logistics, but also allow the vibrant economy and Han-dominated population of the Sichuan Basin to ‘more easily spread and radiate into the Tibet region’ when it is completed in 2030 (Sohu 2018).

On the ‘Second-Generation Tibetan’ (藏二代) WeChat channel, Han colonists are posting photos of themselves in front of the Potala Palace with short tales about their deep and emotive connections to the TAR. They are a unique cohort of constructors, according to one WeChat blogger (Yuanshi Wuyu 2023). They exhibit a close-knit ‘compound culture’ and ‘strong sense of identity and ownership of Tibet’. They also know how to navigate the messy politics of Tibet and have grown wealthy thanks to their high government wages and side business hustles. ‘They have a complex relationship with Tibet, one of both repulsion and yearning’, and their children, who have a difficult upbringing in the mainland separated from their parents, are inevitably drawn to work in Tibet.

Take for example, Yang Guoying (杨国英), whose father worked at the Lhasa Aircraft Maintenance Factory from 1960. With her elder sister already working in Chamdo, Ms Yang left her mother and younger sister in the countryside and joined her father in Lhasa in 1974. She began work at the Yangbajing Geothermal Power Plant in 1977 and married her

husband, a battalion commander in the PLA, in 1981. She worked in Lhasa until her husband was transferred to Chongqing in 1988, but frequently returns to Tibet for a visit (Second-Generation Tibetan 2023).

The Final Frontier

There are no reliable figures for the number of Han living and working in the TAR. The 2020 National Census put the number at 443,370 or 12.2 per cent of the total TAR population. This represents an 81 per cent increase since 2010 and a nearly 500 per cent increase since 1990 (Fischer 2021; Sun and Li 1995: 37). While this figure includes some temporary migrants (anyone who was resident for more than six months), it does not include the chiefly Han soldiers stationed in the TAR as part of the PLA and the People's Armed Police. It is also worth noting, as Andrew Fischer (2021) does in his analysis of the census, that data collection occurred in November 2020 in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic and the data does not include temporary business migrants and tourists, who typically travel to the TAR during the warmer summer months.

The growth of the Han population in the TAR is driven by increased inbound migration, with the highest growth rates occurring in Lhasa, Ngari, and Nyingchi. In 2020, the Han accounted for 40 per cent of Lhasa's population, with nearly 250,000 'permanent' residents (Lhasa City Bureau of Statistics 2021). While not my focus here, the flow of Han settlers into the TAR is being accompanied by a range of schemes aimed at dislocating Tibetans from their homeland, chiefly for work and education. The Tibetan population living permanently outside the Tibetan Plateau doubled during the previous decade (2010–20), with the largest increases in Jiangsu (12,573), Guangdong (11,347), and Beijing (8,698) (my own analysis of Figure 1.4 of the 2010 and 2020 National Census data).

To the Chinese Government, these two-way population flows are examples of 'inter-ethnic contact, exchange, and melding' (各民族交往交流交融) and central to its effort to forge a 'collective consciousness' (Qiushi 2024). Yet, as Peter Hessler (1999) first observed several decades ago, the meat-grinder of 'national fusion' (民族融合) leaves much bitterness

and sadness in its wake: Tibetans dispossessed of their homeland and culture and resentful Han colonists who would rather be somewhere else.

China's efforts to colonise the Tibetan Plateau stretch back to the first century BCE, when the Han Dynasty established agricultural colonies in the region (Rohlf 2016: 7). In the modern era, figures from Sun Yat-sen (1922), the 'father of the nation', to Pan Yue (2002), the current director of the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, have advocated following the example of the United States, Australia, and other settler-colonial countries in populating and developing frontier areas. Advances in technology may soon help the Communist Party complete the job. Railways, roads, and planes can easily ferry Han colonists on to the plateau, but medical breakthroughs may soon address the challenges posed by altitude sickness and oxygen deprivation.

In 2010, researchers at Beijing Genomics Institute (BGI) identified the EPAS1 gene mutation, which allows the Tibetan physiology to cope with high-altitude living. They also found that 9 per cent of Han Chinese also carry the mutation (Liu 2018; Yi et al. 2010; Huerta-Sanchez et al. 2014). Gene-editing technologies like Crispr-Cas9 could make it technically possible to alter the genomes of Han settlers who lack the mutation, with one Chinese scientist, controversially, proving the effectiveness of this technology and sparking global condemnation in 2018 (McCurry 2024). Meanwhile, BGI Shenzhen (2014) and the PLA Air Force General Hospital (2021) have patented tests to screen Han individuals for the EPAS1 gene. Once confined to the realm of science fiction, these developments are quickly becoming reality. As Darren Byler (2021: 22–23) illustrates for Xinjiang, new technologies are turning China's borderlands into high-tech colonies of control. Tibet could well be next. ■

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Uxorilocal Marriage in Xiaoshan, 1970s to 2020s

Matchmaking corner
in Wansong park.
Source: Zhangluyuan
Charlie Yang.

Zhangluyuan Charlie YANG

A form of matrilineal residence, uxorilocal marriage is often celebrated in the contemporary Chinese online sphere and beyond as a sign of female empowerment. This essay challenges this narrative by exploring the history of uxorilocal marriage in Xiaoshan, a district of Hangzhou. By foregrounding the personal experiences of those involved, the essay reveals the tensions and struggles between genders and generations embedded within this marriage practice. Against the shifting backdrops of collectivisation, the One-Child Policy, and urbanisation, men and women from different backgrounds have entered uxorilocal marriages for various reasons. Yet, the patriarchal desire to continue the family line by monopolising the reproductive value of daughters to add male heirs to the family has always been the driving force behind these arrangements.

In late March 2024, I accompanied Yifan to Golden Phoenix, a matchmaking agency specialising in arranging uxorilocal marriages in Xiaoshan District, Hangzhou, a place where life still moves at a leisurely pace. Yifan was in his early thirties, short, and slightly balding. As we were on our way, he constantly made self-deprecating jokes about his appearance, worried that the matchmaker would reject him at first glance. When we arrived, the agency's owner, Wang Zilong, an elderly man with grey hair, was talking with another male client. While we waited anxiously outside the door, we heard the following dialogue:

'Tell me about your basic information—your profession, income?'

'Pet groomer, with an annual income of over 150,000 yuan.'

'Sorry, young man, I'm afraid I can't help you. The parents of the girls don't desire this profession'.

'But my education and appearance are both excellent.'

'But the girls' families just don't like boys in this profession.'

Overhearing this from the doorway, Yifan cast me a worried look.

'Xiaoshan is crowded with men waiting to marry into wealthy families.' Since the early 2020s, this phrase has become ubiquitous on the Chinese internet, where Xiaoshan is often jokingly referred to as the 'capital of *zhuixu*' (赘婿, that is, 'live-in sons-in-law'). Nestled in an old farmers market, the matchmaking agency and its owner, Wang, used to receive a diverse array of male clients daily. These men, hailing from all over the country, exhaustively showed all their capital—education, appearance, and income—to Wang in the hope of a chance to marry into a wealthy bride's family.

Marriage in China has always been intertwined with a range of issues, including preference for male offspring, generational conflicts, and political implications—everything bar love (Croll 2010). In contrast to the patriarchal qualities of traditional Chinese marriages, the uxori-local marriage is often seen as an abnormal form because it ostensibly degrades the status of the man (Wolf 1995). Although there are variations, uxori-local marriages generally see the groom move in with the bride's family as a live-in son-in-law, without having to pay a bride price. In fact, he may even receive gifts from the bride's family. In the past, this would have been grain or livestock, but nowadays it can be a car or a house (Zhang 2008: 114). In the current online sphere, uxori-local marriage has sparked debates about gender. In the eyes of many, uxori-local marriage signals female empowerment and gender equality. Furthermore, terms like 'soft rice man' (软饭男) have cast male inferiority in this type of arrangement in a playful and entertaining light, which has had the effect of overshadowing the challenges that women can face in this type of marriage arrangement.

My research on the topic arose from a sense of disjunction. Growing up within an uxori-local marriage family in Hangzhou, discussions about gender were a subtle taboo within my household.

For those embedded in the lived experience of uxori-local marriages, the hopeful rhetoric of female empowerment often diverges from personal realities. During fieldwork in 2024 in Hangzhou's periphery, I sought to uncover how people from different social backgrounds and generations perceive uxori-local marriages and *zhuixu*. What changes have occurred in uxori-local marriages over the past few decades? What is the primary source of tension in these marriages? Do women truly hold the upper hand, and how do they view their own status?

The 1970s: A Widow's Dilemma

Huang Meixian vividly recalls the day she married her husband, Chen Shuigen, in the spring of 1969. After she had her first menstrual period at 18, the village elders told her family about a young man of similar age in the neighbouring village. 'I just thought he looked decent because he was a worker at the gear factory, unlike us, farmers. My parents were very solicitous and said: "Let's settle this",' Meixian remembers.

A year after her marriage, Meixian became pregnant:

At that time, everyone was poor. Most families survived on wild vegetables and watery porridge. Because my husband had a stable job and received benefits from the state system, we sometimes received allocations of pork. We were the most well-off people in the village.

The couple lived a simple life for seven years, during which Meixian gave birth to three daughters, each one year apart. But in the winter of 1976, tragedy struck when Shuigen was accidentally caught in a machine and died.

After her husband's death, Meixian, along with her three children, was kicked out of the house by her in-laws. 'People see daughters as burdens who will eventually marry out, so they don't want to continue raising their own granddaughters,' she complains. After her in-laws reclaimed her land, she returned to her parents' home with her daughters. They were penniless. To make things worse, three generations were now living together under one roof and the

only male member was an elderly man who could no longer work, which made them a target of bullying in the village. She discovered that someone had tried to sabotage her livestock—her sole source of income—which heightened her sense of isolation and despair. When her eldest daughter neared the age of 10, Meixian's life came close to taking a radical turn. Meixian's parents told her about a bachelor from another village whose parents, wife, and children had all passed away. Living in extreme poverty in a thatched hut, he had made a surprising proposal to Meixian's parents: when he learned that their daughter was also widowed, he had offered to become a *zhuixu*, asking for nothing more than the chance for the two of them to live together as a family.

Uxorilocal marriage in Meixian's village dated back to the period of collectivisation in the 1950s. 'At that time, men earned eight work points a day, while women only earned six,' she explained. 'So poor families with sons would sometimes offer their sons as *zhuixu* to slightly better-off families with daughters. They would also privately negotiate to give the man's natal family some grain each year.'

'However,' Meixian adds, 'a *zhuixu* had to change his surname to that of his wife. Everyone believed this was a disgrace.'

When local officials learned about Meixian's situation, they actively encouraged her to consider this marriage arrangement. However, when the discussions were reaching the final stage, the man suddenly reneged. Not only did he refuse to take Meixian's surname, Huang, but he also demanded that at least one of Meixian's daughters be given his surname. The cadres unexpectedly supported this idea, arguing that it would enable both families' lineages to continue, while also relieving the remarried couple of the need to have more children, which would lessen the population burden on the state. Meixian felt deceived and betrayed. She recounts: 'Even this ugly old man wanted to humiliate me! I refused his demand, and then he insulted me, claiming I was cursed to bring bad luck to my husband!'

Meixian's story shows how, during the Mao era and in the early reform period, many men in China entered uxorilocal marriages reluctantly. Unless they had no other choice, what man would willingly abandon his ancestors to humiliatingly serve someone else's family? Nevertheless, Meixian's experience

highlights how, for women, too, uxorilocal marriage was far from a matter of pride. 'Actually, I felt embarrassed and ashamed about this idea, and my parents felt the same,' she tells me. 'It was like constantly telling others that our family had no sons. Moreover, it was as if I were announcing that I was a slutty woman who needed to remarry. This was my disgrace.'

What happened to Meixian in the 1970s vividly reflects a disorientation caused by the ambiguity of gender roles as population control became a priority of the Chinese leadership in the early reform era. According to Croll (2010), national population control officials recognised early on that uxorilocal marriages might elevate women's status, which would ultimately help reduce the national birth rate. However, even among grassroots cadres during the early period of family planning, efforts to eliminate gender discrimination in practice were still unconsciously influenced by an entrenched patriarchal ideology and implicit expectations of female chastity. Even though a woman in an uxorilocal marriage brought a live-in husband into her family, this did not necessarily mean a reversal of power dynamics. Men, having lost their position, felt emasculated, while women, bestowed with the role of 'head of the household', were filled with anxiety that stemmed from a deep-seated sense of inferiority due to the absence of a male heir in the family. The fervent cult of the son in popular society constituted the ultimate value—one that was grafted on to daughters in peculiar ways.

The 2000s: Daughters as De Facto Sons or *Zhuixu* as Adopted Sons?

Born in 1977, Hu Baojuan is the eldest daughter in her family. In Hu Village, her birthplace, the eldest daughter in families with only daughters was required to 'stay at home' to carry on the family name, like a son. Although Baojuan sometimes struggled with this duty, she accepted her fate. She knew a girl in the village who had run away from her arranged uxorilocal marriage, which had left her parents angry and ultimately had forced their youngest daughter to assume the obligation instead. 'That was unfair because it changed the order of precedence,' Baojuan

says. ‘It was impossible for a family not to keep any offspring. I don’t want to disappoint my parents: after all, they raised me, shouldn’t I fulfil their wishes?’

In 1999, Baojuan met Li Qiwei, a young man from a poor mountainous area, who had just been assigned to a steel factory in Hangzhou. By then, she already held a tenured primary school teaching position and had secured urban *hukou* (户口) status, while Qiwei had no connections in the city. ‘My parents thought Qiwei’s family was too poor,’ Baojuan recalls, ‘but I told them that such poverty and simple relationships had its advantages: it was a little less of a face-saving burden for him.’ Finally, in 2000, Qiwei married into Baojuan’s family, and they lived together in a two-storey self-built house in the village. Qiwei informed his parents and brothers of the news over the phone since his family could not afford to travel the long distance to Hangzhou. The only wedding ceremony was held in Hu Village, with Baojuan’s parents covering all expenses.

While it is commonly believed that the strong backing of the natal family should grant the women in uxori-local marriages a dominant position, the reality is more complex. ‘A wise parent-in-law won’t mistreat the *zhuixu*; instead, they will treat him like an adopted son,’ Baojuan explains. She recalls how in the early years Qiwei’s meagre income often fuelled his deep-seated insecurities. He would vent these frustrations by lashing out at Baojuan. Out of guilt and a sense of indebtedness, she silently endured and shouldered more ‘gender labour’ as she and her parents made every effort to restore the *zhuixu*’s masculine dignity (Ward 2010: 237).

In 2008, Baojuan accompanied Qiwei to his hometown for the first time. Before their departure, Baojuan’s parents gave Qiwei RMB6,666—a sum considered auspicious. Baojuan referred to this as ‘saving-face money’ (面子钱), meant to show Qiwei’s relatives that the family’s finances were under his control. Asked how such a significant sum was spent, Baojuan explains: ‘Part of it went into red envelopes for the relatives’ children, and it was essential for Qiwei to hand them out, symbolising that he is the head of our family.’

‘The other part is more interesting,’ she laughs. ‘Qiwei would deliberately lose money in poker games with relatives. Every time he pulled out a thick stack of bills, his relatives would feel reassured that Qiwei

was doing well in our family.’ The child’s surname became another important issue. Baojuan specifically instructed her son: ‘If someone asks your name, don’t say your surname is Hu, since you won’t see them for years, just tell them you take your father’s surname.’

The 2020s: From Shameful Taboo to Open Desire

Every Saturday morning, Wansong Park fills with people coming for matchmaking. It is there that I encountered Yifan, the man I described at the beginning of this essay. He was holding in his hands a placard that read:

Male, 32 years old, height 167, average appearance
Master’s degree in Mathematics from Zhejiang University
Hukou in a fourth-tier city in Gansu
Programmer, annual salary of 300,000 yuan before tax
No house, owns a car (still paying off the loan).
Looking for a local Hangzhou girl
Ideally with property
Willing to offer a bride price of up to 200,000 yuan
Open to being a *zhuixu*.

Like millions of migrant workers, Yifan was forced to adapt to a so-called 996 work regime (9am to 9pm, six days a week). ‘Nowadays, some tech companies have even started implementing an 11/11/6 work schedule,’ Yifan said with a bitter smile. ‘I’m really reaching my limit.’ Failing to demonstrate sufficient resilience and competitiveness meant being fired. He once believed that life was a straight line: work hard to save money while young and, eventually, everything would fall into place—career, marriage, and stability. However, he gradually realised that he was helpless as he came from a small town and was the product of an exam-oriented education. He was brought up to believe that study and hard work are the only paths to success; yet, no matter much effort he put in, he did not seem to be able to find a way forward and society never felt as fair as an exam. ‘Many people

take 20 minutes to get from home to this city centre, but for me, this journey has taken 30 years,' he said to me, looking at the crowd.

Yifan is an only child and his parents, who are self-employed in aquaculture and do not have a pension, rely entirely on him for financial support. 'With the current housing prices in Hangzhou, my yearly savings can only buy 1.5 square metres.'

'So,' I asked him, 'does that mean you don't see becoming a *zhuixu* as something shameful?'

He replied: 'Compared to barely scraping by in my current life, the pressure of becoming a *zhuixu* is nothing. There's nothing that money can't alleviate.'

Forty years after the implementation of the One-Child Policy, the boomerang of societal preference for male offspring is once again returning. The surplus male population has led to a marriage squeeze and the ever-increasing bride price demands have transformed sons from reliable caregivers into financial burdens for their parents (Driessen and Sier 2019; Shi 2017). In this context, masculinity is becoming another form of capital, marketed to those who still believe in its necessity. The continuation of the family lineage has given way to the pressures of survival, and the *zhuixu*'s commitment to the patriarchal expectations of his natal family is effectively transferred to his wife's family.

A week later, I accompanied Yifan to the Golden Phoenix matchmaking agency, where the scene at the beginning of the essay took place. Over the past two decades, urbanisation in Xiaoshan has prompted large-scale demolitions, which has allowed many local families to exchange their ancestral rural houses for city apartments after receiving millions in compensation. Low-density rural residential plots have been requisitioned and replaced with newly constructed high-rise commercial buildings. These land development projects have become a primary source of revenue for the government, drawing both residents of the outskirts and new arrivals in the metropole into the market transaction game of the propertied class. As newly affluent families with only daughters grow increasingly reluctant to marry them off for fear of losing family assets, they turn to matchmaking agencies to seek out *zhuixu*.

In June 2024, Yifan eventually went on a date with a girl named Song, whose family house was set for demolition the following year. The number of family members is one of the determining factors for compensation, so Song's family hoped that she would marry soon and, ideally, have a child quickly to secure a larger payout. However, their matchmaking efforts ultimately did not work out. Yifan acknowledged that a *zhuixu* should proactively relinquish certain rights and, in a conversation with me, he expressed his conviction that the fact that the children would not carry his surname would not affect his love for them. Nevertheless, he found that things were crazy beyond his expectations. 'They laid out a dizzying plan for the child's surname: the first child, regardless of gender, would take the surname Song. If the firstborn is a boy, no further children are needed,' he explained. 'If it's a girl, they'd try again; if the second child is a boy, he'd also take Song. But if the first two are girls, they'd attempt for a third child ...' This type of *zhuixu*, as he put it, is like 'an obedient reproductive machine', continuously selling off his reproductive capacities to ensure a male heir for another family. 'It's like I'm marrying Song's parents, not their daughter. This is not what a free marriage should look like.'

Although I have not spoken with Song, the disputes over the family name in the next generation shed light on the dark side of uxrilocal marriage in the 2020s. Today, this type of arrangement has become a shortcut for young migrant men to settle in the big cities. Interestingly, it is often not the women themselves who chose this path, but rather their middle-aged parents, who hold authority within the extended family. For the financial benefit of the entire family, women thrust into the arena of uxrilocal marriages are treated as fill-in heirs only when there is no male heir in the family, and the legitimacy of their status is immediately revoked when the opportunity arises to bypass them in favour of a new male heir. The family surname passed down through *zhuixu* primarily belongs to the woman's father and only secondarily to her. The effort to bear grandsons largely moderates the regrets of those families who were unable to have a son three decades ago under the One-Child Policy. The preference for sons, once hidden by the needs of the times, is ironically being revived under the guise of uxrilocal marriages.

The Illusion of Empowerment

In this essay, I selected representative episodes to present a broad canvas of uxoriocal marriage spanning five decades. When juxtaposed, these stories reveal a vertical thread that guides the evolution of this practice—the conflict between the traditional preference for sons and the state’s intervention in families—leading people to continuously recruit male members into the paternalistic extended family under the guise of women’s empowerment. This shows that, far from the contemporary glorification of uxoriocal marriage as a symbol of gender equality, this practice has always been underpinned by patriarchal control over women’s gendered value. Whether the eldest daughter was elevated to the status of a son, the son-in-law was treated as a de facto adopted son, or disputes arose over the right to the surname of the grandson, the matrilineal residence pattern did not really challenge the authority of the patriarchal line. Only by moving away from top-down grand narratives can we see the hollow prestige and unacknowledged labour of mothers, daughters, and wives and their real-life experiences. ■



China's Urban Question

The Other Side of the Agrarian Question

Jane HAYWARD

China 2017. Source:
@pentium_six (CC),
Flickr.com.

At the turn of the twentieth century, European Marxist theorists grappled with the 'agrarian question': is the peasantry disappearing and, if not, what should we do? The question evolved through changing historical contexts and, by the 1920s, had made its way into the policy discussions of the Chinese Communist Party. Now, after decades of rural land conversions fuelling breakneck urbanisation, we see its face from the other side. The 'urban question' has become central to Chinese policy discussions of development and social organisation: are the cities filling up as planned and, where they are not, what should we do?

From the turn of the twentieth century, Marxist socialist thinkers internationally grappled with what was known as the 'agrarian question'. Initially, this referred to the problem of whether their respective national peasantries were disappearing, transforming into industrial workers as Marx predicted and as was deemed necessary for their revolutionary projects. In the many cases where this, unexpectedly, was not happening, the question became how to organise these peasantries within socialist revolutionary movements. Where these revolutions succeeded, the agrarian question evolved into how best to organise the still existing peasantries

within national projects of state modernisation. In many contexts, the peasantry was conceived as a ‘problem’—a hindrance to the achievement of modernity.

In China, the status of the peasant shifted over time from potent guerilla force of the revolution, to idealised collective labourer of the Cultural Revolution, only to return once more to the symbol of agrarian backwardness of the post-Mao market reforms. This notion that China’s ‘peasantry’ is destined to ‘disappear’ has continued to underpin China’s development thinking and policies in recent decades. The post-2008 Global Financial Crisis recovery hinged on an astonishing urbanisation drive, which saw an intensive acceleration of rural–urban land conversions. This was largely fuelled by the needs of capital to find fixed assets and local governments to find revenue, but ideologically it was underpinned by the same old motivation to ‘solve’ China’s agrarian question. Yet, even today, and despite the extraordinary levels of urbanisation witnessed in China in recent decades, there are millions of rural villagers, while millions of urban houses remain empty. While estimates among scholars of the number of small household farms in China vary, the consensus puts the number at more than 200 million of these households living, at least partially, off produce from a few hectares of land (see, for instance, Cui et al. 2018). In what has now surely become China’s ‘urban question’, the presumed rural–urban trajectory continues to meet multiple obstacles and forms of grassroots resistance, causing headaches for urban planners and policymakers at both the national and the local levels.

Observing social transformations in England in the late 1800s, Karl Marx (1990) wrote of an epochal shift in the organisation of production with major ramifications for how society was structured. The large numbers of rural smallholders who had for centuries worked the common land of the English countryside were vanishing. In a process of land enclosures stretching back to the fifteenth century, dispossessed farmers were being forced to move into cities, where they had no means of survival but to sell their manual labour in industrial factories. They had to accept meagre wages and degraded working conditions imposed by the capitalist factory owners. As the numbers of urban workers swelled, this new proletariat became the backbone of what we now know as the Industrial Revolution.

Marx was cognisant of the brutality of the process of forced dispossession and coerced transformation of peasants into ostensibly ‘free’ labourers who, in fact, had no means to escape this harsh fate. He called this ‘primitive accumulation’, the historical cleaving into two separate classes, one with property, one without—a process that, in fact, constituted nothing less than the epochal shift from feudalism to capitalism (see Marx 1990: 874–75). Even so, he saw the seeds of a beautiful future within this violent transformation. For Marx, after all, the peasantry was not a group to be nostalgically salvaged, since they were a relic of a past mode of production now on its way out: unproductive and, mostly, politically backward. Instead, the emerging two classes of downtrodden workers and capitalists engorged with new wealth would lead, he envisaged, to an unsustainable social conflict. From this antagonism would spring forth a united uprising by the workers, a collective seizure of property and production, and the flowering of an equal, emancipated, and plentiful society.

Are the Peasantries Disappearing? If Not, Then What?

By the end of the century, Marx’s inspirational narrative had come to move a generation of socialist thinkers, in various nations, who were witnessing the bleakness of the new industrialising world around them. With eager anticipation, they looked for the dissolution of the smallholding peasantry—a sign heralding the oncoming development of the capitalist mode of production, which was now conceived as the necessary pathway to communist utopia. Yet, despite their hopes, the continued existence of the peasantry posed a vexing intellectual and political problem. Since our own socialist programs require the erosion of the smallholding peasantry, they mused, how do we account for the fact they are still here and, in practical terms, how should we deal with them?

In 1894, reflecting on the peasantry in France and Germany, Friedrich Engels was certain the problem was temporary. ‘[L]ike every other survival of a past mode of production, their time is doomed,’ he declared. Nevertheless, their continued existence (at least for the time being) posed a challenge for Marxist

socialists. Large imports of cheap grain were coming into Europe from North and South America and India, undercutting the peasants' livelihoods. In their straightened circumstances, they were politically allying with large landowners whom they saw as their protectors. This posed a strategic dilemma that Engels called 'the peasant question'. To break their alliance with the landlords and win them over to the socialist side, should the Marxist socialist parties support the peasantry in their hardship, even though they required them—indeed, actively willed them—to be eroded from existence? Yes, argued Engels, since supporting them with the aim of coopting them to the revolutionary cause would at most only slow the required, and inevitable, historical process.

Meanwhile in Russia, the Narodniks—nationalist agrarian populists—were rivalling the Marxist socialists. They proclaimed that, on account of the *obschina* (the strong and enduring agrarian commune on which village life was founded), capitalism could not take hold in Russia and the peasantry was not, in fact, going to disappear. The young Marxist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin was having none of it. To prove the Narodniks wrong, he scoured the vast collections of regional statistics on landholdings. In the resulting lengthy 1899 treatise, defiantly titled *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (an F-you if ever there was one), he deployed all the numerical data he could to demonstrate that the erosion of the peasantry was indeed under way. They were fragmenting as a social group, he maintained, into entrepreneurial farmers (a 'rural bourgeoisie'), on the one hand, and dispossessed labourers (a 'rural proletariat') on the other (Lenin 2004: see p. 177 for a useful summary).

The socialist theoretician Karl Kautsky (1988) conducted a similar investigation as he debated agrarian policy within Germany's Social Democratic Party but reached different conclusions. The livelihood of the smallholding peasant was being degraded along with the development of urban industry, he found, but they were not disappearing as expected. Instead, they were clinging on, trapped in the position of necessary suppliers of menial labour to large capitalist farms—a doom loop in which each sustained the other. This presaged a whole new set of problems for revolutionary theorists. If the longed-for

peasant dissolution, on which the hopes of international communism now hinged, was not turning out as planned, then what?

The Agrarian Question in China

In fact, while the pre-capitalist, or feudal, understanding of the peasant was certainly most prominent in Marxist thought, ideas about the peasant nature, or its place in history, had never been fully settled. Even Marx had detected, he thought, a dual nature in the peasant. In his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, which was remarkable for its scathing critique of peasant backwardness, he had noted that the mostly conservative traditional peasant also possessed revolutionary potential (Marx 1937). This was of particular significance in China, where, by the 1920s, the peasantry was very much in the majority and the fledgling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was struggling to find its footing. Thus, Engels' 'peasant question' from three decades earlier—whether to ally with the peasantry as part of a revolutionary strategy—was crucial. For Party leader Chen Duxiu, the feudal, reactionary peasant could not be counted on as a suitable ally since their violent potential would likely lead to destructive barbarism (Huang 1975: 279; see also Day 2013: 19–20). In contrast, peasant organisers in the CCP pointed to the strong grassroots movement in rural Hunan and foresaw in this the very future of the revolution. As Mao Zedong (1927) famously put it: '[S]everal hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back.'

Even as Mao wrote this, CCP leaders, following advice from Stalin and the international advisors in the Comintern, were attempting to hold on to a fractious alliance with their own rivals, the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT). The hope was that, together, they could see off the powerful warlords who had entrenched themselves in various localities across China. Following intense discussions at the CCP's Fifth Congress in 1927, it was decided, in

practical terms, not to ally with the Hunan peasant movement, despite its evident revolutionary potential. On paper, the peasant movement was to be supported and land redistribution condoned, but only for landlords with holdings of more than 500 *mu* (1 *mu* is about 0.667 hectares). Since only 20 per cent of landholdings were more than 100 *mu*, this meant that, in practice, most landlords were to be left untouched, denying the peasant movement any real power (Huang 1975: 284). Behind this rationale was the fact that a large part of the military on the KMT's left wing (the wing with whom the CCP was still attempting to collaborate) was made up of Hunanese landlords whose interests would be directly threatened (Huang 1975: 283–4). This policy was evidently misguided, as leading figures on the KMT's left turned violently on the Hunan peasant movement shortly afterwards (Huang 1975: 285). Within three months, Chen Duxiu was removed as leader of the CCP, largely due to 'his failure to give proper leadership to the peasant movement' (Huang 1975: 288).

In 1949, just as Mao had predicted, the communist revolution now under his leadership swept to victory on the backs of the peasant masses. The pertinent 'agrarian question' at this point became not what was the role of the peasantry within the revolutionary movement, but how should the vast peasantry be configured within the new national project of state modernisation? In other words, how best to utilise the peasantry as a source of accumulation (Byres 1986: 15)? The solution—once more, based on Soviet advice—was the collectivisation of rural land and, by the late 1950s, large collective farms, or 'people's communes' (人民公社), had been set up across China's countryside (Gao 2019). To consolidate the peasantry's new role as a resource to be utilised for state-building, the national rollout of a household registration permit, the *hukou*, divided the population into two: agricultural and non-agricultural (or urban) citizens. Those with a non-agricultural *hukou* were eligible for state-provided public goods and welfare provision, including children's schooling and health care; those with agricultural *hukou* had to rely on the communes where they were registered for such amenities. Employment and abode were also fixed to the *hukou*—a measure to prevent rural people from

migrating to cities. The goal was to preserve state resources for the cities and for collective agricultural production to support the growth of urban industry by supplying cheap grain to the state (Hayward 2022b).

By the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, the dominant understanding of the peasantry was that, under Party guidance within the communes, their supposedly revolutionary tendencies could be nurtured to produce a model socialist agrarian labourer devoted to building the communist future. A long way now from the original Marxist narrative of feudal peasant disappearance, the peasant in this political vision was conceived as central to national socialist modernity.

The Feudal Peasant Returns

The death of Mao and the official end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 led to a change in policy direction and an embrace of market reforms. By 1983, most communes had been dismantled and agricultural land nationwide was reorganised, with production rights redistributed to individual households—known as the household responsibility system. As the 1980s progressed, national policymakers' attention shifted from the countryside to urban growth. Accompanying this shift, understandings of the peasant as backward and feudal returned to the fore in a prominent discourse that held the peasantry largely responsible for China's developmental failure, though now often presented within a liberal, pro-market framing rather than a Marxist one (Day 2013: 47–69). This discourse was widely fuelled in public discussions by the broadcasting in 1988 on Chinese national television of *River Elegy*, a six-part documentary about Chinese culture that strongly supported this feudal peasant trope (Day 2013: 13–14).

This narrative of the peasant as historical relic and developmental obstacle fit well into what was now an era of worldwide hegemonic neoliberalism characterised by widespread processes of peasant dispossession across the Global South (McMichael 2006: 408–9). It was also highly compatible ideologically with the new form of land-based capital accumulation

that was emerging in China. Fiscal reforms in 1994 had reorganised national budgetary allocations so that local governments further down in the bureaucratic hierarchy could no longer rely on distributions coming from higher up, but instead had to fend for themselves. The consequences for China's countryside were profound. Cash-strapped local governments layered extra taxes and fees on to rural households and, in addition, turned systematically to processes of converting collective rural land to state-owned urban land that could then be leased to developers for revenue. Processes of rural to urban migration—already under way as China opened to foreign investment and national policymakers embraced China's new identity as 'factory of the world'—accelerated. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 exacerbated these processes. As numbers of rural–urban migrant workers soared to world historic levels, conditions in the countryside deteriorated. City government officials had by now become accustomed to turning a blind eye to the still existing *hukou*, welcoming the supply of cheap labour that appealed to outside investors. Rural migrants in cities were typically treated as second-class citizens, however, lacking access to the city's resources and barred from settling there permanently. Yet, with fewer people at home in the villages and some agricultural plots now abandoned entirely, the land conversions—in fact, structurally determined land grabs—only became easier (Li 2003).

Even as these processes met widespread grassroots resistance from villagers, in what Sally Sargeson (2013) termed 'violence as development', they were commonly regarded in policy and official circles as inevitable and necessary processes of modernisation. In this view, the obstinate peasantries were finally being uprooted and agrarian modes of living swept into the past. According to Sargeson (2013: 1068), more than 4.2 million hectares were converted in this way between 1990 and 2008. In a triumphant echo of Marx's earlier narrative, the disappearance of the peasantry was now not so much expectantly searched for as forced through by an enthusiastic state bureaucracy in alliance with an increasingly powerful construction and real estate industry. Prominent historian and public intellectual Qin Hui (1998: 37)

wryly observed how the term 'primitive accumulation' had now found its way into common parlance not as a horror of capitalism, but as commendatory—a welcome sign of China's long overdue development.

The Origins of China's Urban Question

In 2008 the Global Financial Crisis hit. The export industry that had sustained the jobs of millions of rural migrant workers sputtered as the crisis hit overseas consumers, particularly in the United States. The Chinese Government estimated that 20 million migrants lost their jobs, more or less overnight (Sanderson and Forsythe 2013: 12). In an emergency bid to keep the economy going and create employment, China's then premier Wen Jiabao famously announced a stimulus package of RMB4 trillion (US\$586 billion). Only a small portion of this, however, was to come directly from the government via state banks. The rest was to be made up via a complex system of loans and bonds, often via local government finance vehicles (LGFVs). Set up by local governments, LGFVs are unregulated companies that can obtain loans from commercial banks or sell bonds themselves to raise funds off the books so that local governments can bypass their official spending limits. Underpinning this whole system was the collateral required for the loans: rural land. The rural–urban land conversion process, already well under way since the 1990s, took off again with renewed vigour. The idea, which was entirely logical on paper, was that, once the construction projects were completed, the newly developed urban areas would bring new sources of revenue along with a thriving economy fuelled by homeownership consumers. This should both allow the payback of the loans and help to raise living standards across the country. A dramatic surge in local government spending ensued over the next several years, channelled largely into urban construction projects. At the time, as the rest of the world struggled to get their economies back on track, China's government stood out for its determined action and impressive ability to weather the storm (Sanderson and Forsythe 2013).

As some of those engaged in the original agrarian question debates at the turn of the twentieth century had recognised, however, the assumed historical trajectory from agrarian peasant life to modern industry and burgeoning cities had rarely run smoothly. China's building boom led to a 'debt mountain' and a 'housing bubble' along with an array of new challenges for policymakers. One of the most remarkable of these is what have become known as 'ghost cities': a vast number of empty residential buildings. Some of these are in small areas distributed around otherwise occupied cities and some take the form of 'new towns': newly built areas up to the scale of small cities, largely uninhabited. In what Sorace and Hurst (2016: 306) aptly termed 'phantom urbanisation', ghost cities entail the construction of 'an urban façade, which resembles a city externally, but lacks basic infrastructural and economic requirements for city life, or, in some cases, even people, behind its showy exterior'. The number of empty homes was estimated at 65 million in 2017, according to data from the China Household Finance Survey (Ariano 2021). In September 2023, former head of China's statistics bureau He Keng stated that there were likely more empty homes than could ever be filled (Kelter 2023).

This unusual pattern of development was supported all the way by policymakers' deep faith in the inevitable transformation of China's millions of rural smallholders into urban dwellers and, furthermore, a belief that this constituted the hallmark of modernisation. As a result, the original 'agrarian question' has given way to the 'urban question', which is, in a sense, the other side of the same coin. Not '*are the peasantry disappearing as expected and, where they are not, what should we do?*', but instead, '*are the cities filling up as planned and, where they are not, what should we do?*'

The Embattled 'Tiered-City' System

Phantom urbanisation is often accounted for using 'local governments gone wild' types of explanations, with implied images of lower-level bureaucrats off their heads on excess fiscal stimulation. For instance,

the front cover of *The Economist* announcing China's 2008 Financial Crisis recovery package, emblazoned with the title 'China Seeks Stimulation' and complete with a photo of a large syringe embellished with the Chinese flag, is particularly striking (The Economist 2008). In fact, though, just a few years after the 2008 crisis, an overarching national planning strategy emerged that appeared to provide a rationale for it. This strategy, based on years of localised policy experiments, was set out in two key central planning documents released in 2014, one on *hukou* reforms, the other on urban planning (State Council 2014a, 2014b). Together, these documents consolidated the nationwide hierarchical ordering of cities based on population size—popularly known as the tiered-city system. Urban *hukou* status was to be extended to a further 100 million people over the following few years. Welfare access in cities for rural migrants was to be improved and *hukou* requirements relaxed in smaller cities. Cities of fewer than 500,000 people were to have restrictions lifted completely to encourage rural people to move there. The eventual goal was the elimination of the urban–rural distinction on residency permits altogether.

On the other hand, entry to the best-equipped and most desirable cities—most notably, the largest megacities such as Beijing and Shanghai, was becoming harder. Here, *hukou* applications would only be granted based on a stringent and highly selective point-based system. Only those able to demonstrate certain levels of income, education, professional skills, or other factors marking them out as 'high-quality' individuals would qualify. Meanwhile, disincentives, such as barriers to accessing suitable housing or schools, would keep less affluent and less-educated migrants away (for an overview, see Hayward 2022a: 1028–29). By clear central government design, the tiered-city system required that people once considered 'peasants' were expected to move into lower-tier towns and cities where their life prospects were limited and facilities and public goods of low standard. This nationwide plan for cities relied on the taken-for-granted assumption that urban living, rather than rural life, was both an inevitable historical process and, obviously, the preferable option.

However, it has not been working out as planned. Researchers in Chinese universities have identified a dual dilemma: those able to settle permanently in cities are unwilling to and those wanting to settle permanently in cities are unable to (Cheng et al. 2022).

Three Aspects of the Urban Question

The urban question is manifest across many current policy debates and I can only scratch the surface here by way of introduction, but there are three major issues with which policymakers are currently grappling. First, the appeal of urban *hukou* for many rural villagers has fallen far short of expectations. The 2014 plan to implement 100 million rural–urban *hukou* conversions did in fact succeed. However, the flow of migrants into some cities has exceeded expectations and, crucially, many do not plan to settle there permanently or convert their *hukou*. In 2020, according to official figures, 18.5 per cent of China’s urban population were still rural *hukou* holders (Chan 2021). The reasons for this are complex and still being researched. Many rural *hukou* holders do not have high enough, or stable enough, income to purchase an urban home and therefore see no long-term prospects in the city. Moreover, in an ironic twist, the incremental extension of welfare benefits to non-local migrants staying in cities temporarily, which was intended to encourage the rural to urban movement of people, appears to have *disincentivised* rural–urban *hukou* transfer. Since these migrants can already benefit from the city’s resources without transferring *hukou*, some are opting to keep their rural *hukou* so they can benefit from the urban resources without giving up the added security of their rural land, to which they may intend to return (Tang and Hao 2018).

Second, and relatedly, who gets to live in China’s largest megacities and whether the ‘peasants’ (now as low-paid migrant workers) should be allowed in are hotly contested questions. The intentions set out in planning documents to keep first-tier cities as the preserve of wealthy elites and ‘high-level talent’ are being robustly challenged in policy circles. Over the past decade, this played out over the issue of urban villages (Hayward and Jakimów 2022). These are

formally farming villages that stayed in place as the metropolis expanded around them. Often having lost their farmland, but still living recognisably in villages contrasting with the high-rise skyscrapers around them, the inhabitants (still with their rural *hukou*, despite now being inside cities) began to rent out spare rooms to low-paid migrant workers. With their dilapidated appearance and unregulated micro-economies, urban villages were deeply unpopular with city planners, not least due to their enabling of large numbers of low-paid migrants (disparaged in official documents as the ‘low-end population’, 低端人口) to have an affordable life in the city. Many such villages have been demolished and the migrants evicted. Yet, these demolitions and evictions were often fiercely opposed, not just by the migrants themselves, but also from within policy circles, where many argued that burgeoning city life requires freedom of labour mobility, not excessive top-down state planning.

Though many urban villages are no longer standing, the disagreement continues, now in the form of the street-stall debate: the question of whether the informal labour of street-stall vendors (many of whom are from the countryside) should be allowed in China’s larger cities. This dispute has proved so heated that, in 2020, the division between China’s top two leaders, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, broke into the open at such a volume that it made the international media (The Economist 2023). Despite Xi speaking out loudly against street stalls, they continue to receive statements of support from large cities, and the unresolved issue continues to occupy policy discussions in what appears to be a direct challenge to the neatly formulated top-down plans of the tiered-city system.

Third, with the rise of the urban question, policymakers are increasingly asking: given that rural smallholders, despite our best efforts, are not urbanising as we presumed, how do we organise the millions that still exist? This requires a reconsideration of the role of the countryside. Large-scale corporate farming has for years been idealised and envisaged as the future by many in Chinese policy circles. This way of thinking fit well with the plans for urban developers, who appeared to have forged an alliance with agribusinesses as they worked together to shift rural people out of their villages and into tower blocks (Zhan 2017). Unsurprisingly, this was justified by the belief that the scattered plots of the household responsibility system—essentially conceived

as a holdover of backward smallholdings—were not compatible with a modern economy. Yet, as sociologist Shaohua Zhan (2019: 141) observed: ‘The previous strategy of urbanization, which is vividly depicted in China as “to enrich peasants by reducing peasants (*jianshao nongmin jiushi fuyu nongmin*)”, seems to have reached its limits.’

Policy discussion on the role of smallholding farms appears to be fuelled by renewed momentum. An op-ed in the *China Daily* last year entitled ‘Unlocking the Potential of Smallholder Farmers’ (Wang 2023) extolled their importance both to global agriculture and to China’s national economy and advocated for their increased support and investment. Thus, with urban and rural always inseparable, the urban question leads back to where we began: *the peasantry has not disappeared as expected and, since they have not, what should we do?* ■



Imagining Social Change through Policy Failures in China

Bricks. Source: @thepismire (CC). Shanghai Bund Crowd Source: @spez (CC), Flickr.com.

Andrew B. KIPNIS

This essay begins with a brief discussion of four ways of imagining social change: replacement, transformation, transition, and reconfiguration. Focusing on transformation and transition, it then asks: when examining or experiencing a particular social transformation, how can we understand the presence of things past? How do practices, logics, ideals, and things from the past inform, influence, or simply exist in the 'new' social context? Understanding forms of continuity is simply the flip side of the coin of understanding change. Conceptualising continuity intimately relates to imagining social transformation. This essay proposes two modes of understanding continuity: haunting and recombinant transformation. It ends by working through some Chinese examples of the place of the past in the present: location-based social control in the Great Famine, the birth-planning policy, and the recent Covid-related lockdowns in Shanghai.

Change and continuity are interrelated dynamics. All social scientists grapple with this interrelation. How is continuity embedded in change? How does change enable continuity? In struggling with such issues, social scientists, along with everybody else, create concepts to depict the dynamics of change and social continuity. These concepts are never a perfect match with the worlds they describe, and sometimes they distort our perceptions of the dynamics at play as much as they enable them.

Consider four ways of imagining dynamics of change and continuity: replacement, transition, transformation, and reconfiguration. Replacement of one thing with another is perhaps the easiest way to envision change but also the most obviously flawed. The very word 'replacement' implies that the people considering the substitution see the context of the replacement as stable over time. If you replace my

essay with another one in this journal, everything else about the journal issue can remain as it was. Consider a more detailed example. Let us say the original human population of a particular city is annihilated through warfare and the original buildings and infrastructure are destroyed. The victors build a new city on the same site according to their rather different architectural tastes and plans and repopulate it with their own people, who speak another language and have rather different customs. Still, the site of the city remains unchanged. There are continuities in the climate of the place, in the flora and fauna, the fungi and insects, the bacteria and viruses, the rivers and mountains, and in the shape of the landscape and its vantage on the heavens. While the new inhabitants may differ profoundly from the original inhabitants, they would share at least some technologies, the genetic commonalities of humans, and the same climatic conditions. As the theme for an academic conference on Chinese world-making held in Heidelberg in 2023 announced, social change takes place in the ‘more-than-human world of the human–technology–nature entanglement’ (World-making Center 2023).

In political arenas around the world, rhetoric abounds promising replacement of one regime with another. ‘If only I, or my party, or my faction of the army is allowed to replace the current rulers, our country will be completely different,’ they say. ‘We will have a revolution and utopia will replace dystopia.’ The promises of revolution and liberation in Maoist China were a particularly extreme example of such rhetoric. But, of course, the promised utopia was never realised, necessitating the continual search for hidden enemies of the new regime who could be blamed for the lack of progress, as happens to varying degrees almost everywhere.

Even in historical cases of genocide, such as among Native Americans in the United States or Jews in Germany, the presence of the people who suffered attacks continues in numerous ways: as a conscious political force and historical memory; through medicinal and culinary practices and artistic legacies; through techniques and technologies of farming, hunting, living, and moving; in placenames and inflections of language; in legacies of violence and governance; and in the genetic constitutions of people who deny or do not even know their own heritage. Because complete replacement is an impossible form of social

change, using concepts of replacement to frame social change often gives rise to the experience of haunting. Haunting occurs whenever some social dynamic, persona, or experience that we thought was dead and buried somehow re-emerges to inform or affect our present world. Ghosts can re-emerge from any supposedly past epoch and seemingly become more powerful if we have repressed them, ignored them, or forgotten them.

So, how can we imagine change beyond replacement? The remaining three concepts involve some type of recombination of new and existing elements. Chinese concepts of Yin and Yang can help here, as transformations in a Daoist imagination necessitate reconfigurations of Yin and Yang. The *Taijitu* (太極圖, the famous Yin–Yang diagram), begins from the assumption that there was always already a bit of Yin in the Yang and vice versa. But perhaps a simpler starting point here is the children’s toy, a transformer. When the pieces are moved around, the toy can ‘transform’ from a human-like robot into a car or a truck or an airplane, but after the transformation all the original pieces are still present. Using the toy as a starting point for thought has its limitations. In the social transformations we analyse, new elements may be recombined with old elements in the new formation. But at least the toy provides a way of imagining the place of the past in the present. And if we take Daoism more literally, it is written that all the myriad things of our world emerge from the elementary forces of Yin and Yang. Everything is in some way recombinant.

All three remaining concepts of transition, transformation, and reconfiguration rely on such a notion of recombination. What differentiates them is the way that we imagine the state of the world, the country, or the object after the recombination. In the case of transition—at least as I use the word here—we are depicting a change from one *nameable* state of being to another. I take the idea of transition from the classic anthropological work of Arnold van Gennep (1960) on rites of passage. For van Gennep, rites of passage ritually reinscribe a person from one type to another: from child to adult, from unmarried to married, from uninitiated to initiated, or from living being to ancestor. The process proceeds through the three steps of separation, transition, and reincorporation and has a definite beginning and end. The naming of the before and after states risks the reification of

the reality these names indicate. Consider the case of a transgender person who ‘transitions’ from a man to a woman or vice versa. On the one hand, the transition reflects the individual’s strong desire to identify and be recognised as a named being categorically opposite to the type that was assigned at birth. On the other hand, the very existence of transgender people challenges the idea that people fall neatly into the two categories of men and women.

In contrast, transformation, as I use the term, indicates a type of recombinant change that proceeds in a nameable direction, but does not necessarily have nameable before and after states. Consider the process of urbanisation. The term might refer to the transformation of a cluster of houses into a small town, a town into a small city, a small city into a regional capital, or a regional capital into a global metropolis. While in all cases we could say that the place is becoming more urban, there is not necessarily a single clear line that divides the urban from the rural.

The final form of recombinant change is reconfiguration. Here there is change but no definitive before and after states or even a discernible direction of change. Imagine a Rubik’s cube in the hands of an unskilled fumbler like me. No matter how I twist the pieces around, no progress is made towards solving the puzzle. Though we can see that the positions of the individual pieces have changed, we can discern no directional process of overall transformation. Here I am reminded of the favourite poem of sixteenth-century Chinese naturalist Li Shizhen, as cited by Carla Nappi (2009: 138–39):

Transformation of the universe goes on
without respite.
Cycles of ebb and flow—now advancing now
retreating.
Image and essence evolve, a transforming
magicad.
Boundlessly subtle, beyond language’s pale.
Ruin. Fortune’s mistress; Fortune, Ruin’s
flame.
Misery and joy crowd the gate, blessing and
disaster seed the soil.

All three ways of imagining change carry their own dangers. If transition risks reifying our categories, reconfiguration gives us nothing to analyse. And

none of them protects us entirely from the dangers of haunting. If imagining change as replacement almost guarantees that haunting will occur, even recombinant imaginations of change risk the possibility of ignoring or forgetting one or more of the elements involved in the process of change. The ignored elements may return to haunt the post-change present.

Now that we have gone over a few ways of imagining social change and continuity, I would like to consider three rather disastrous policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that are not often considered together: the Great Leap Forward of 1958–62 and the resultant famine; the birth-planning policy of 1980–2015; and the zero-Covid policy of 2020–22 and its abrupt reversal. In examining these policies side by side, I move beyond the standard divisions of the Maoist era from the reform era, or even the Xi Jinping era from the Deng Xiaoping era, to explore continuities in communist policymaking and dynamics of state–society relations that emerge under CCP rule. I would also like to think about the discontinuities among these three policies, which are especially evident with the zero-Covid policy. In so doing, I want to move away from considering the policies as entirely matters of politics and society in a purely human world, and instead consider the directions of change as occurring in the ‘human–nature–technology entanglement’. In considering the forms of recombinant change that connect these three policies, I also hope to further illuminate the advantages and disadvantages of the conceptualisations of change.

The Great Leap Forward

As the earliest of these three disastrous policies, the Great Leap Forward has been thoroughly analysed by scholars and historians, though there are still many debates about the intricacies of the policies that led to mass starvation. The Great Famine is also comparable in many ways with other famines in the socialist world: Russia in 1922, Ukraine in 1932–33, North Korea during the 1990s, and perhaps, North Korea again today. What all these disasters have in common are the institution of centralised economic planning, the collectivisation of farming, controls on



Government officials being sent to work in the countryside, 1957. Source: 赵仰山 - 中国摄影艺术选集 (1959), Wikimedia Commons (CC).

the movement of farmers and those fleeing famine, and the control and politicisation of information about the extent and distribution of the famine.

Centralised economic planning proceeds through the logic of quotas. Information about all commodities including grain is summarised through numeric quotas and this information is used to control and plan the distribution of the commodities. Each factory or farm is given a quota to produce a particular product and the leaders of that unit can be evaluated in terms of whether they meet that quota. When evaluating cadres, the quotas can be reified in two different ways. Sometimes the goal is simply to meet the quota. In this case, centralised planners have determined the optimum amount for the quota and reward cadres for meeting this target. In the case of the Great Leap Forward, however, centralised planners did not simply set quotas, but also encouraged local leaders to set quotas as high as possible, often well beyond what was possible. The setting of exceptionally high quotas was linked to political rhetoric that suggested that by adopting Maoist methods of planting, harvesting, fertilising, and organising agricultural production, or by politically committing oneself to working harder to

meet Maoist ideals, higher production targets could be realised. All the limits of nature and technology could be overcome by politically motivated effort.

The collectivisation of farming enabled the extraction of the grain from the farmers. When farming is enacted by individualised family farmers, the farmers have a voice in determining how large the harvest is and how much of the harvest must be turned over to the central authorities in the form of grain taxes. The size of the harvest is widespread local knowledge and the grain is first harvested by individual households and only later given to the state. But on large collectivised farms, harvested grain is directly placed into local state coffers. Some households might not have a clear idea of how good the harvest is in all the places in their collective. The organisation of collectivised farms thus facilitated the extraction of grain from communities at rates that led to mass starvation. It also exacerbated food shortages as starving collectivised farmers were reluctant to work—one of the factors leading to the famine extending across several harvests instead of just one.

The ways in which starving farmers could survive were also greatly restricted during the Great Leap period. The two most common means of surviving famine (at least in non-socialist regimes) are to conserve energy by not working or to flee famine-affected areas, moving to a place where it is possible to work or beg for food. In general, China's household registration system, in combination with the ways in which food was distributed in the planned economy, made fleeing famine difficult, though many individuals undoubtedly did so. Such flight was facilitated in some places by local governments that turned a blind eye to fleeing farmers or even encouraged some of their inhabitants to leave. Though finding work outside the centrally planned economy was difficult, small informal corners of illegal, black-market work existed even at the height of the Maoist period. But in other places local government collectives organised security forces to prevent people fleeing and to force them to work. As starving people are extremely difficult to motivate, these forces became infamous for their brutality. Consequently, many of the deaths that occurred during the Great Famine were the direct result of state violence rather than simply starvation, as Yang Jisheng (2018) has so painstakingly documented.

A final aspect of the Great Famine are the restrictions on information that blocked knowledge about the horrors of the violence and starvation from becoming widespread. It was not simply a matter of the lack of freedom of the press, though that was certainly important. Government officials were also encouraged to lie and exaggerate to each other in a variety of forums, and being unwilling to do so was often taken as a sign of political disloyalty. Local leaders could also be punished if their districts were seen to be enduring famine, thus such leaders often took steps to control the forms of information emerging from their districts. Preventing starving farmers from fleeing famine-hit areas was often as much about preventing the flow of information as it was about preventing cities from being hit with an influx of beggars. The persistence of the famine for three full years was also driven by the lack of a free flow of information, though one of the more interesting historical debates about the Great Famine is the extent to which central leaders knew about the horrors to which their policies had led and simply

chose to ignore the evidence; compare, for instance, the depictions of the famine by Dikötter (2010) and Garnaut (2014).

The Birth-Planning Policy

The second of the three policies I will discuss is the birth-planning policy of 1980–2015. Though it is associated with the reform era and the regime of Deng Xiaoping in particular, many of the elements discussed in the analysis of the Great Famine can be identified in recombinant form in the birth-planning policy. Let us begin with its name. I have chosen to translate this as the 'birth-planning policy', not only because it is the most literal translation of *jihua shengyu* (计划生育), but also because this name captures the Leninist elements of the policy much more clearly than other English terms like the 'birth-control policy' or the 'one-child policy'.

The policy was implemented through the logic of quotas. As part of a grand centralised plan for the whole of China, demographers calculated a quota of births for the entire country for a given year. Demographers then calculated the number of people of marriageable age who were registered in the official household registration booklets for every city and province in China. Provincial officials did the same for every rural county in their provinces and so on. The centralised national quota thus became smaller quotas for every governed place-based entity in China, often down to the village level. In urban areas, where the policy was literally a one-child policy, this logic was not so apparent. Every legally married couple had the right to bear one child. But in rural areas the issue of quotas dominated the state–society dynamics of the policy. In most rural areas the policy was a one-and-a-half-child policy. Legally married couples were entitled to one pregnancy on marriage, but could have a second child, after a considerable delay, if the first child was a girl. In practice, this meant officials could keep the number of births in their district within the quota by regulating the time between the birth of a first daughter and the allocation of 'a quota' for a second child. Rural leaders who did not enforce the quotas for their districts could face harsh penalties. Illegal births or pregnancies were labelled as being 'out of quota' (超额).

The enforcement of the policy required a small army of birth-planning cadres to check on the most intimate details of the reproductive lives of all women of childbearing age in China, including menstrual cycles, birth-control methods, and, of course, pregnancies. The implementation of the policy also reinforced China's household registration policy as a way of keeping track of both women who lived in the districts where they were registered and women who migrated for work or other reasons. In urban areas, most of the population conformed to the demands of the policy, as they did in some rural areas. But in other rural areas, resistance to the policy resulted in considerable levels of out-of-quota pregnancies. As in the case of preventing starving farmers from fleeing famine-hit districts during the Great Leap Forward, different dynamics of state-society interaction emerged in different places. In some, the policy was enforced by compelling abortions and sterilisations on people who did not comply.

In 2013, official government sources stated that 336 million abortions and 196 million sterilisations had taken place under the birth-planning policy (Ma 2013), though these numbers do not indicate what percentage of these abortions and sterilisations were essentially involuntary. (As sterilisation is rarely chosen voluntarily, it is safe to assume that most of the sterilisations were involuntary.) In other instances, women with out-of-quota pregnancies managed to hide their condition from officials and give birth to children who were never registered. These children were described as having 'black' household registrations and their numbers are largely unknown. Children with black household registrations cannot attend public schools, do not receive publicly provided services like vaccinations, and must live entirely outside the realm of state-provided services and regulations. In a third dynamic, state officials tacitly allowed out-of-quota births, but fined parents astronomical sums, usually about six times the average annual income in a given area. The budgets of many local governments greatly benefited from these fines, but their legacy of child impoverishment in rural China cannot be neglected.

Different scholars have different interpretations of the effects of the birth-planning policy. Some argue that the supposed reductions in population achieved by the policy are illusory; that a policy based on mild economic incentives, strong propaganda, and strong

services for both couples who did not want children and for those who had them would have achieved a similar reduction in population without the pain of the forced abortions, forced sterilisations, and the child impoverishment that resulted from the black household registrations and fines (Whyte et al. 2015). Others argue that the policy did reduce the size of the population, but that in hindsight this reduction has not benefited China, as the country is now suffering from a birthrate that is too low (Feng et al. 2016; Qi 2024; see also Greenhalgh 2024). But few seem to claim that the policy was a success, that its benefits outweighed its considerable costs. So, why did the policy persist for so long?

As in the case of the Great Leap Forward, part of the answer lies in the dynamic interplay of the use of quotas in governing, the empowerment of an army of officials in the enforcement of the policy, the mechanisms of tracking the physical location of all women in China, the politicisation/moralisation of the quotas in the process of enforcement, and the relative silencing of alternative views about the policy or even basic information about its disastrous effects. The stories of the victims were silenced in a twofold manner. The absence of a free press prevented news about them from reaching the public, while the desire of lower-level officials to present a positive picture of their accomplishments to higher levels prevented the smooth flow of negative information through official channels. The more the achievement of quotas required extremes of sacrifice by some, the more the quotas were portrayed as sacred matters of morality, of patriotism, of loyalty to the regime. The empowerment of an army of officials to enforce the policy also created a bureaucracy that benefited from the policy's continuation. And this bureaucracy simultaneously internalised the sacralisation of the policy narrative and became a powerful force for reproducing the narrative in the public sphere. While there were debates about the policy at the highest levels, the voices of those wishing to change it were weakened.

In comparison with the Great Leap Forward, a few contrasts can be made. During the Great Leap, those empowered by the policy were the local militias who used murderous levels of violence to control the movement and working habits of hundreds of millions of starving farmers. With the birth-planning policy, an entirely new, mostly female bureaucracy was established. The birth-planning policy lasted

much longer than the Great Leap Forward, though both policies clearly extended for much longer than their glaring faults could possibly seem to justify. The Great Leap Forward required collectivisation, while the birth-planning policy targeted families, or even individuated women. Finally, the birth-planning policy pushed the whole Chinese society in a direction it was headed anyway, while the Great Leap Forward attempted to move the country in a direction that it would not have gone without an extremely forceful intervention.

The Zero-Covid Policy

The third policy I will examine is zero-Covid and its sudden reversal in 2020–22. Covid-19 was a problem throughout the world and many countries endured policy reversals and high death rates. In the case of China, government restrictions on basic mortality data mean that the world might never know how many people died there from the virus or what the rates of excess mortality were. Just as the Chinese Government withheld basic demographic data about the country from the Great Leap Forward until 1982, the current Chinese regime is refusing to share basic demographic data under its new ‘Measures of Data Cross-Border Transfer Assessment’. It is highly likely that China suffered both from mortality rates that were as high as those anywhere in the world and lockdowns that were longer lasting, more painful, and more economically, psychologically, and medically destructive than those in other parts of the world.

If one were to use the fifth wave of Covid-19 in Hong Kong as a guide, which was caused by the Omicron variant, there would have been approximately 2.5 million deaths in China after December 2022. Hong Kong did have a slightly more elderly population, but it also had a higher vaccination rate, more vaccinations with the more effective Biotech vaccine (as opposed to the less effective Sinovax vaccine), greater availability of hospital beds with ventilators for Covid patients, and greater availability of medicine for Covid patients than China. Given the lack of health infrastructure in many poorer parts of China, as well as the fact that the spike in Covid rates in China was extremely sharp (an occurrence

that public health experts say should be avoided at all costs), I would not be surprised if as many as five million people died.

For 2020 and 2021, China’s zero-Covid policy was largely successful, with frequent demands for nucleic acid testing and painful but relatively short and localised lockdowns and quarantine restrictions seeming to be a reasonable price to pay for containing the virus and limiting mortality rates to levels much lower than for the rest of the world. But after the more transmissible Omicron variant emerged in December 2021, the severity and frequency of the lockdowns and testing requirements increased, as did the numbers of people forced into quarantine facilities. News of deaths attributable directly to Covid containment measures spread even on China’s highly restricted internet and various forms of protest emerged, especially in China’s richest city, Shanghai. Despite the wealth there, lockdowns were so long and severe that many people suffered from food shortages (Ling 2023). For a very long 2022, ever more severe lockdowns tortured large portions of China’s urban population until the government suddenly relented at the end of the year, resulting in a massive and globally unprecedented surge of Covid. The extent of morbidity and mortality from that surge may never be fully known.

Until late 2022, the Chinese Government attributed the successes of its zero-Covid policy to its unique socialist system of government, and it is true that China’s ability to enforce repeated mass testing, quarantines, lockdowns, and travel restrictions, as well as to build and staff testing and quarantine facilities and to police lockdowns, exceeded that of any other country in the world. Some of China’s advantages reflect dynamics discussed in relation to the first two policies. Its command structures and strict internal hierarchies enabled it to quickly focus resources and redeploy personnel. Its campaign-style focus on a single quota, zero Covid, led to the sacralisation of this target. The pursuit of and support for the policy by officials and the public at large were labelled as evidence of loyalty to President Xi and as a contribution to the project of proving to the world the superiority of China’s socialist system. Political rhetoric closely linked the containment of the disease to a morality of effort or devotion to the cause. The sacrifices of people suffering through,

and local governments paying for, seemingly unlimited quantities of nucleic acid testing resulted only in silence. Those who opposed any of this sacrifice were accused of ‘lying flat’ (躺平)—an absolute form of anti-nationalist evil thoroughly denounced by the propaganda apparatus.

The government’s experience in tracing the physical location of its residents and restricting their movements proved invaluable. Its restrictions on the press also gave it a strong hand in controlling the narrative on how the zero-Covid policy was playing out, but, as with the other two policies, this control proved embarrassing when the policy eventually had to be reversed. While with the first two policies it is probable that many local governments were able to deceive the central government about problems encountered during implementation, in the case of zero-Covid, it was very difficult for local leaders to hide information about outbreaks in their localities. The nature of the disease is to spread, and the diffusion of the disease also spread information about the disease. The sudden reversal of the policy was most likely also linked to the disease’s abilities. As the costs and difficulties of enforcing the policy mounted, cracks appeared in the enforcement edifice. These cracks enabled the disease to begin spreading and, once that happened, it could no longer be contained without an unimaginable level of enforcement. The Xi regime did not so much acquiesce to the arguments of those who opposed the zero-Covid policy, as it accepted a reality that it could not cover up with layers of propaganda and silencing (Li 2023; see also the special section in *HAU* organised by Ling and Zhang in 2023).

Other problems emerged linked to controlling the flow of information or, rather, extracting it from the population. During the Great Leap Forward, authorities were most concerned with individuals who were hiding stores of food. During the birth-planning policy the government was concerned with women hiding pregnancies. In both cases extreme methods were taken to force disclosure of the required information. With zero-Covid, local governments feared that individuals with Covid might mask their symptoms to avoid testing and quarantine and, hence, they limited the availability of common cold and fever medications. As these restrictions were enacted over two years, the factories that made these medicines in China ceased production. Consequently, when the

policy was abruptly reversed at the end of 2022, China lacked even the most basic medicines. Similarly—and arguably also because authorities were singularly focused on detecting and controlling instances of the disease—the government stopped emphasising the vaccination of the population and refused to import significant amounts of externally produced vaccines, which were superior to the locally produced variety. Vaccination did little to enhance zero-Covid, as vaccinated individuals could catch the disease but remain symptomless. In other words, China’s singular, campaign-style focus on detecting the disease exacerbated the effects of catching it, which is why it is highly probable that China’s Covid mortality rates were as high as the worst in the world.

But if some of the dynamics of the zero-Covid policy seem familiar, new elements are equally visible. While the desire to control the movement of the population and the flow of public information has deep historical roots, how such control was enacted was heavily influenced by the digital revolution. China has invested heavily not just in smartphone technology, but also in policing and surveillance capabilities that can be enhanced using such technology. The real-time location data that smartphone use enables are further enhanced in China by the extensive use of surveillance cameras, especially in urban areas. In China, algorithms that integrate data from surveillance cameras, smartphones, and social media use, as well as methods for combining these data with human police work, have been polished for the past decade in Xinjiang, where vast resources have been deployed to police, surveil, and control the Uyghur population and thereby to develop these capabilities (Byler 2022). During the zero-Covid policy, many of these techniques were redeployed on the majority Han populations of China’s wealthiest cities.

The most notable dynamics of state–society interaction in relation to zero-Covid revolved around these technologies. Chinese citizens just wishing to feed themselves or secure basic medicines utilised smartphone technologies to order goods and to share information on what modes of delivery were possible in an ever-shifting landscape of restrictions on the movement of people and goods. Chinese citizens who wished to avoid being locked down by algorithms learned which places at which times of the day were most likely to trigger algorithmic sanction. Migrant workers who lived in places with partial but

incomplete surveillance camera coverage learned where the gaps were. Chinese citizens who were outraged about their suffering under zero-Covid used virtual private networks (VPNs) to get around state controls on self-expression or filmed themselves and their neighbours suffering and shared this information on social media. The Xi-era propaganda apparatus has responded with ever more severe repression of those who express their opinions in the Chinese public sphere and continues to restrict the ability of Chinese citizens to share their opinions, or even basic information about the country, with anyone outside China. The digital age clearly provides not only more channels for accessing and sharing information, but also more tools for surveillance, repression, and policing. Every hopeful wave of new forms of expression only seems to be matched with counterwaves of repression.

Conclusion

So, what conclusions can be drawn by comparing these three policies? The first is to reinforce some of the points with which I began. Replacement is a myth. The reform era did not replace the Maoist era, and the Xi Jinping era has not replaced earlier reform periods. Rather, there have been strong continuities in governing styles and dynamics across the various eras. These include the use and politicisation of quotas in campaign-style governing; the control of people through identifying their location and restricting their movement; the control of information about the negative effects of policies, which affects the dissemination of information not only among the public, but also within and among various levels of the Chinese bureaucracy. The result of this control of information is that disastrous policies are often extended well beyond their use-by dates.

For those used to thinking of historical turning points in terms of political regimes or of Chinese society as continually improving, the most recent Covid campaign might appear to be a bad case of haunting. How is it that so much effort was put into such a bad policy only for the disastrous outcomes of the policy to be covered up? I would say that the covering up of the disastrous outcomes and the haunting are interrelated phenomena. Continually

covering up policy failures makes their re-emergence seem unthinkable. Imagining contemporary Chinese history as a series of regimes defined by the switching of the top leaders of the party is a part of the coverup. China is defined not simply by the names of its leaders.

The three policies relate to one another as forms of recombinant change. From the vantage point taken in this essay, the relationship between the Great Leap Forward and the birth-planning policy is primarily one of reconfiguration. The elements that make up the latter policy shift to reflect its differing targets, but it is hard to discern any overall direction to the difference between the two policies. If there is one, it would be that of the modernisation of kinship dynamics in which a desire for tiny families spreads from a relatively small urban sector to most of the nation. In contrast, the connections between birth planning and zero-Covid reveal a more definitive direction, which is towards the digitisation of society. The role of smartphone technology and the analysis of big data in state-society relations underwent a massive transformation during the 2010s. Here, I cannot help but note that the most major changes in Chinese society have to do not with the regime of its leaders, but with the natural/technological environment in which the country exists. Moreover, the failures of these policies painfully reveal the dangers of attempting to control 'nature' by controlling people. More humble attitudes towards the limitations of centralised control are needed.

Classic liberal analyses of East Asian modernisation assume that countries naturally become more democratic after they reach a certain stage of development. China has proven this assumption unfounded, although I do not think all aspects of such analysis have been disproven. The classic argument suggests that in the early stages of modernisation or economic development, the paths to success are clear. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan demonstrated in a million ways the types of policies and investments that were most likely to succeed in mainland China. But as China, or any late-developing country, catches up in terms of technology and infrastructure, the directions that will enable continuing development are not so clear. It is not so easy for a benevolent dictator to see what has been done before, demand that everyone follow him in doing it, and have successes to show.

In addition to having the examples of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to follow, China had the size of its internal market and the youth of its growing population as advantages. But China's demographic dividend, advantages of being a late developer, and levels of international tolerance for its nationalism and authoritarianism are all shrinking. These changes do not guarantee democratisation, and I believe that the space for disastrous authoritarian policy failures will only grow. The low-hanging fruit of easy economic expansion exists no more. The possibilities of disaster will be further enhanced by campaign-style governing and the covering up of poor results.

How bad could it get? One need only look at North Korea or perhaps Russia to see how poorly a regime can treat its people and remain in power. ■



Great, Glorious, and Correct

The Origins and Afterlives of a Maoist Slogan

Jeremy BROWN

General Secretary Xi Jinping on Tiananmen Gate, 1 July 2021. Source: Xinhua.

This essay traces the birth and growth of the claim, first made by Mao Zedong and then popularised by Liu Shaoqi in 1951, that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is ‘great, glorious, and correct’. Drawing on Mao’s language, Party theorists’ articles from the 1990s, and netizens’ writings from the past decade, the article sheds light on how the CCP has handled flawed formulations during different historical periods and how satirists poke fun at and theorists struggle to explain official slogans.

On 1 July 2021, General Secretary Xi Jinping stood atop Tiananmen Gate and thrust his fist in the air while saying: ‘Long live the great, glorious, and correct Chinese Communist Party.’ It was the dramatic conclusion to his speech commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Descriptions of the Party as ‘great, glorious, and correct’ (伟大、光荣、正确) appear occasionally in official media and on banners at important Party events. The abbreviated version of the slogan, *wei guangzheng* (伟光正), uses the first character of each word and looks like a person’s name, for which reason in the rest of the essay I will refer to it by its popular usage as a person named Wei Guangzheng. This shorthand, which in popular culture means ‘righteous’ or ‘politically correct’ verging on ‘delusionally arrogant’, appears much more frequently in casual

conversation and online discourse these days than the Party's own proclamation of its eternal correctness. In recent months, Chinese-language blogs and social media posts have used the phrase to criticise and satirise the ascension of Kamala Harris as the Democratic Party nominee for US President in the wake of Joe Biden's decision to step down (H-O-O-H 2024), Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Canada's carbon tax (flyinmatrix 2024), the Israeli army's killing of Palestinian civilians (iMoeAya 2024), and the Democratic Progressive Party of Taiwan (irvinedai 2024), among many other topics. How did this happen? How did an official slogan, used rather sparingly and with a touch of embarrassment by the Party that invented it, take on a critical life of its own?

Origins

Tracing the birth and growth of the idea that would eventually become Wei Guangzheng sheds light on how the CCP has handled flawed formulations during different historical periods and how theorists struggle to explain official slogans and how satirists poke fun at them. Mao Zedong's decision to use the word 'correct' to describe the Party in 1951 is the key to understanding the staying power of Wei Guangzheng. 'Great' and 'glorious' seem like meaningless puffery, easy to ignore. Of course the Party would call itself great and glorious; what else could it possibly be? But what would be the propaganda value of any political party proclaiming its essential correctness? Nobody is perfect. Why would a ruling party give potential critics such an easy opening to point out all the times it has been mistaken or incorrect?

In *An Anatomy of Chinese: Rhythm, Metaphor, Politics*, Perry Link writes about the concept of speaking correctly in the context of the politics of the PRC. Link (2013: 16) analyses the 'great, glorious, and correct Communist Party' slogan, noting the percussive rhythm of the phrase and the importance of putting the three adjectives in their proper order. Who made up the phrase in the first place? Party history researcher Lu Yuan published an article about the birth of the formulation in 1996. According to Lu, comrades writing a chronology of CCP history during the 1980s had always thought that Liu Shaoqi was the originator of the idea that the Party was great,

glorious, and correct. Liu was indeed the first Party leader to start popularising and explaining the formulation in March 1951, which is why Bao Tong (2016) has attributed the phrase to Liu and praised him for genuinely wanting the Party to admit to its mistakes.

It was, however, Mao Zedong who first used the phrase in February 1951 in his 'Main Points of the Resolution Adopted at the Enlarged Meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China'. In a section about Party rectification and Party-building, Mao wrote:

Ours is a Party that is great, glorious and correct; this is the principal aspect which must be affirmed and made clear to cadres at all levels. However, it must also be made clear to them that there are problems which have to be straightened out and that in the new liberated areas a prudent attitude should be adopted towards Party building. (In English, Mao 1977a: 47; in Chinese, Mao 1977b: 36)

According to Lu Yuan, Mao had two reasons to proclaim the Party's gloriousness in early 1951. The first was a response to international critiques of the CCP as a peasant party that was backward or somehow less legitimate than other communist parties worldwide whose members came from the urban industrial working class. To Mao, the CCP represented the interests of the working class and was therefore as great and glorious as any other communist party. The second reason had to do with the rapid expansion of Party membership since 1949, which had prompted Gao Gang, head of the Northeast Bureau, to complain that rich peasants and bad elements had been allowed to join the Party. This is the source of Mao's emphasis on correctness. He was saying yes, of course there are problems. Whenever we face problems, we will correct them. And no matter how many problems we face, it is important to emphasise the overall correctness of CCP rule. Mao's message was: do not play up problems to question the Party's right to rule.

In this origin story, Lu Yuan did not mention what else was on Mao's mind in February 1951. China's most decisive wartime victories against US and UN forces in Korea had occurred between November 1950 and January 1951. Mao's son Mao Anying was killed by American bombs on 25 November 1950 (Zhou Enlai

waited until 2 January 1951 to inform Mao of his son's death). On 10 February 1951, US troops recaptured Inchon after having abandoned the port a month earlier. On 18 February—the same day that Mao wrote that the Party was great, glorious, and correct—US reports confirmed ‘an enemy withdrawal along the entire central front’ and, in mid-March, UN troops retook Seoul. The war had been a surprising source of greatness and glory for China in late 1950 but by February 1951, battlefield setbacks and mourning his son must have shaken Mao. Why else did he feel the need to say that the Party (meaning himself) should always be considered correct, despite occasional problems?

Mao need not have worried. His decision to ‘resist America and aid Korea’—which was made over the objections of top People's Liberation Army generals—along with the death of his son in the war, which was a pivotal event in his life, as highlighted by Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun (2007: 625–26), solidified Mao's role among the Party elite as a man apart and an infallible genius whose decisions and motives could not be openly questioned. China's battlefield victories against the most powerful army in the world had proven that Mao was correct to overrule his overly cautious comrades. And he had suffered a parent's worst nightmare: his son was buried in a martyrs' cemetery in Korea. What a sacrifice. How great, glorious, and unquestionably correct.

After Liu Shaoqi spoke about the great, glorious, and correct phrase in March 1951, a writer named Qin Chuan (who would become editor in chief of *People's Daily* during the 1980s) published a 24-page book titled *The Great, Glorious, and Correct Communist* (偉大、光榮、正確的共產黨人), featuring such chapters as ‘The Most Loyal and Courageous’, ‘The Most Visionary’, ‘The Most Selfless’, ‘The Most Progressive’, and ‘The Most Disciplined’. After an initial print run of 30,000 copies in July 1951, the Northwest People's Publishing House churned out 760,000 copies by June 1952. Qin devotes most of his space to explaining how Party members can embody greatness and gloriousness, although the chapter on discipline mentions how Zhang Guotao's pursuit of a mistaken line resulted in his expulsion from the Party in 1938 and underscores the importance of democratic centralism (Qin 1951: 21). The appearance of Qin's book in 1951 makes sense in the context of the rapid growth in CCP membership that Mao had in

mind when he spoke about fundamental correctness and occasional errors. It was a manual for new Party members, reminding them to aspire to greatness and avoid mistakes.

In 1952 and 1953, two *People's Daily* articles about punishing cadres who had wrongly accused people of being counterrevolutionaries featured exonerated men praising the Party's ‘greatness, glory, and correctness’ in overturning unjust verdicts and punishing bad officials. These reports are part of the genre that Aminda Smith (2021) examines in her article analysing a moment when the Party publicised punishing cadres' mistakes during the early 1950s. The pieces are rare examples of the Wei Guangzheng slogan appearing in official propaganda in the way that Liu Shaoqi had hoped it would be used: to celebrate a Party that admits its mistakes and corrects them.

After 1953, Wei Guangzheng went into hibernation until the height of the Mao cult during the Cultural Revolution, when the phrase appeared on Mao badges, propaganda posters, and a wall photographed by White House photographer Byron Schumaker in February 1972 as President Richard Nixon's motorcade drove through Beijing. The Cultural Revolution version of Wei Guangzheng, divorced from its 1950s context, represents the hardened version of the slogan discussed by Perry Link. Its correct order and percussive rhythm, not its substance or original intention, became the point. It had become a proper name. But not an unproblematic one.

Afterlives

When Xi Jinping thrust his fist in the air on Tiananmen Gate on the CCP's one-hundredth birthday in 2021, he was reciting the Cultural Revolution version of the formula. He was not considering its original context or the part of the phrase that raises questions. The ‘correct’ part of the slogan is a problem. Party theorists understand this, especially in the aftermath of the Beijing massacre of 1989, which was difficult to plausibly depict as the action of an eternally correct Party. Hu Sheng, director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, directly tackled the trouble with proclaiming correctness at a CCP history conference in 1996. ‘Great and glorious are adjectives’, Hu (1996:



'Spectators in Front of a Large Sign on Nixon's Motorcade Route in China', Byron E. Schumaker, 21 February 1972. Source: National Archives White House Photo Office Collection.

18) said, but 'correct is an essence. Being correct or incorrect is something rigid. If you are wrong, you have failed; if you are correct, you have succeeded.' Hu made sure to say that the victory of the Chinese revolution was the result of the Party's correct leadership and proof of its correctness, but his bigger point was to explain that the phrase had never meant to imply that the Party was always correct.

The rest of Hu's speech dwelled extensively on periods, especially the Cultural Revolution, when a mistaken or incorrect line dominated Chinese politics. Yet even during the worst periods of erroneous CCP leadership, Hu said, correctness was always present, resisting and fighting against the incorrectness and leading to the outcome of a stronger, better Party. Hu even made two oblique references to June Fourth, saying that 'our Party faced the danger of collapsing but we did not collapse, we withstood' the crisis. Probably exhausted by his twisted logic, Hu backed off by the end of his speech. He concluded by saying:

It might seem like my speech is defending what Chairman Mao and Comrade Shaoqi said more than 40 years ago about the Party being great, glorious, and correct, but I am not advocating that we say it all over the place now. All I am saying is that the phrase is not wrong—the entirety of the Party's history can illustrate this point. (Hu 1996: 25)

Hu's final message, urging his audience to avoid overusing the slogan, helps to explain why Wei Guangzheng is not more ubiquitous and instead pops up on special occasions like the Party's birthday. In 1996, Hu had no idea what the internet would become. Unofficial online responses to official slogans have given Wei Guangzheng a life of its own over the past two decades.

Xiao Qiang and the team at *China Digital Times* have documented how netizens have used the term 'great, glorious, and correct' to poke fun at the CCP

and critique top leaders' self-righteousness, especially between 2009 and 2014 (China Digital Times 2023: 47). In 2009, someone created a fake Baidu encyclopedia entry for 'Comrade Wei Guangzheng': an amazing founding leader, who propagated a line of little Weis ('little Greats'), whose genetic mutations caused them to pursue power and money and then turn against 'a small handful of people' (一小撮)—the term the Party uses to denigrate its opponents (Baidu Baike 2009). More recently, the three-character phrase has become shorthand for a type of person, speech, film, or TV show that adheres strictly to Party orthodoxy. Used in this sense, Wei Guangzheng now means righteous, politically correct, or unbearably arrogant. It can be used positively or negatively depending on the context and the speaker. Hundreds of references to Wei Guangzheng pop up every day on social media, especially outside the Great Firewall, but the most illuminating online mentions of Wei Guangzheng posted and still available inside China appear on Zhihu, a Q&A forum akin to Quora.

At some point before August 2014, a Zhihu user asked: 'Has a real Wei Guangzheng organisation or individual ever appeared in history? I've been feeling that positive things also inevitably contain darkness, are there any exceptions to this?' (Zhihu 2014). The first person to answer wrote, 'Foreign countries', garnering 159 thumbs up and 14 responses. The next person to post ventured: 'I think that Mohism should be considered Wei Guangzheng.' Five other users praised this thought. An anonymous commenter, whose post was quickly hidden, wrote: 'Whoever speaks is Wei Guangzheng. Whoever is spoken to will collapse.' After the thread had been dormant for three years, in 2017, someone returned to the topic and wrote: 'Long live the great, glorious, and correct Communist Party of China!' Was this genuine support or an ironic use of official language akin to protesters in 1989 and again over the past year singing the People's Republic of China (PRC) national anthem's line about refusing to be a slave? Only two people gave this last comment a thumbs up.

The next year a netizen did something much bolder, posting three paragraphs—without indicating the text's provenance—from what a quick search reveals to be a 1987 speech delivered by Zhao Ziyang, who was General Secretary of the CCP at the time, stating

that 'the past nine years of practical experience prove that our Party deserves to be called a great, glorious, and correct party', which showed that the line taken since December 1978 had been a 'correct Marxist line'. In his speech, Zhao noted that 'we still have many mistakes in our leadership ... ossified thinking still constrains the minds of some comrades', and people are 'very unhappy with widespread corruption'. Only two visitors liked the post. I wish more people had appreciated its clever, subversive ambiguity. Is the person who posted Zhao Ziyang's words implying that Zhao himself is the answer to the original questioner's puzzle? That Zhao is a real-life Wei Guangzheng historical figure? How better to skewer the slogan than to quote a purged former leader who once used the same exact words to work towards a different political future for China?

The other Zhihu thread worth mentioning originated in the summer of 2017, when someone asked: 'Why are so many people disgusted by Wei Guangzheng language?' (Zhihu 2017). They wrote that they did not object to politically correct speech but wondered whether its pretentiousness was a turn-off for others. One popular answer, posted in 2020 and garnering 19 likes, was:

Wei Guangzheng is a very stupid standpoint. I'd even say that 'Wei Guangzheng' is an insult to the term 'stupidity' because a dumbass might truly be dumb, but Wei Guangzheng is definitely faking it. What is Wei Guangzheng for? The basic goal is for that 'thing' to paper over its own shortcomings. Put simply, it can't reach that high of a level, so it is pretending. (Zhihu 2017)

In just a few sentences, this anonymous critic captured the essence of what made Hu Sheng so uncomfortable when he defended the phrase. The inertia behind Wei Guangzheng's staying power is not dissimilar to how stability maintenance enforcers continue to treat June Fourth as a highly sensitive topic and dangerous anniversary, even though other more recent events (internment camps in Xinjiang, the crackdown in Hong Kong, Xi himself) have become more sensitive than something that happened 35 years ago. It is safer for low and mid-level functionaries to continue censoring June Fourth-related

material and to keep adding 'correct' as the third adjective behind 'great' and 'glorious' than it would be to omit the word 'correct'. The safest career choice for censors and propagandists in China's current political culture is to stick to the original formula. Renaming Wei Guangzheng as Wei Guang would be a simple fix that would defuse an easy target for online satire. To do so, however, would require personal intervention from a top leader fully confident that the CCP has reached the point of no longer needing to proclaim its own correctness. Listen to what Xi Jinping says the next time he pumps his fist on Tiananmen Gate. ■



Switches. Source: @designwallah (CC), Flickr.com.

Rebooting Qualitative Research in China

Reflections on Doing Fieldwork in the Post-Covid Era

Zachary LOWELL, Mengyao LI, and Yuzong CHEN

With the lifting of pandemic-related travel restrictions, international researchers are now returning to China. While the end of ‘Zero-Covid’ opens new possibilities for mobility and access, China remains a challenging environment for fieldwork; given current geopolitical tensions, mounting anti-foreign (and anti-Chinese) rhetoric, and an ever-growing list of ‘sensitive’ research topics, it seems unlikely that conditions for field-based researchers will improve any time soon (see Harlan 2019). As concerns about risk and access continue to loom large in the Chinese Studies community, we—three postgraduate researchers in human geography based at an Australian university—offer a discussion of our recent experiences doing fieldwork in

post-Covid China. Scholars have written about methodological constraints and coping strategies amid the pandemic (Woodworth et al. 2022; Tan et al. 2023), but, to our knowledge, little has been said thus far about the evolving challenges of conducting fieldwork in Mainland China, particularly outside the main cities. In drafting this forum contribution, we acknowledge our diverse backgrounds and research interests, as well as the points of commonality that unite us as colleagues and friends. We identify as a middle-aged white researcher and long-term foreign resident of Shanghai, a Chinese female scholar and environmental activist pursuing a doctoral degree at an overseas university, and a Chinese researcher with

eight years' overseas education experience in both science and the arts. We also have diverse academic interests—water governance, techno-politics, China–Africa relations—yet all our methodologies involve qualitative, embedded research strategies in locations where we are simultaneously insiders and outsiders. Our stories from the field therefore demonstrate how personal, cultural, and political dimensions can intersect in unexpected ways during the research process—for instance, when researching 'peers' who resist identification, when confronting the gaze of male participants, and when family relationships open the door to official sources. In these experiences, our stories unite around a shared theme of discomfort with how we are identified and how we are forced to comply with the expectations of others. We hope that by sharing our recent experiences we can, first, provide some firsthand information about China's post-Covid research environment and the implications

for scholars who are or will be conducting fieldwork in the country. We also hope that our stories can inspire others to consider unconventional research sites and approaches, and to think of obstacles in the field as prompts for reflection and, potentially, fresh insights. Additionally, in recent years, we have witnessed the opening of a frank and thought-provoking discussion about the unacknowledged challenges faced by those engaged in China-based fieldwork, both foreign researchers (Braun and Haugen 2021; Schneider et al. 2021; Alpermann 2022) and Chinese academics (Zhao 2017; Sin and Yang 2018; Xiang and Wu 2023). In our own modest way, we hope to continue this conversation by being honest about our identities, our emotions, our histories, and how these collide with conditions in the field. In the current climate, we believe that it is more valuable than ever to share experiences. Rather than thwarting research, the challenges we face can open new avenues for exploration.

I. Neither Inside nor Out? Researching International Students in China

Zachary LOWELL

Allow me to start with a particularly uncomfortable fieldwork moment. I was seated awkwardly in the dorm room of 'Remi' (all names in this essay are pseudonyms), a PhD student from sub-Saharan Africa enrolled at a university in Nanjing. I had recently arrived as a visiting scholar at the same university, where I was to spend one semester researching China–Africa relations at the level of people-to-people engagement. I had met Remi several times in those early days and our relationship seemed cordial enough. He was also exactly the sort of international student I had hoped to interview for my project. When he agreed to participate in my research, it felt like a huge milestone had been reached. All the stress of preparing for fieldwork in China was finally

paying off, I thought. As Remi sat and carefully read every word of my project description and informed consent documents, though, it was obvious that he was sceptical. When I reminded him that participation was entirely voluntary and he had the right to refuse, he said that he intended to oblige my request, albeit with conditions of his own: he did not want our conversation to be audio recorded, he did not want to disclose any information about his background or future plans, and he did not want his real name written on the consent form. 'If they have my voice, and my name, then they have me,' he said. In this case, I decided it was best not to ask who 'they' might be.

Unexpected Questions

By embedding myself at a university in Nanjing, which offered a specialised course in public administration, one of my goals was to provide a granular view of specific knowledge, networks, and institutions that link China and Africa in areas of human capacity development. With notable exceptions (see, for instance, Sin and Yang 2018; Wu and Song 2023), many studies of foreign students in China, particularly those from Africa, are based on surveys and ques-

tionnaire data, rather than ethnographic methods. Throughout the semester, I attended lectures with the students I was researching; we rode the bus together, went on outings together, played board games together, and cooked dinner together. I became good friends with certain classmates and even visited a few of them in their home countries. Experiences like my strained interview with Remi proved to be exceptional, but this did not mean that the research process was free of complication or ambiguity.

As a researcher who draws on ethnographic techniques, one of my major concerns is whether participants are being honest and sharing their genuine beliefs. This is an issue all social scientists will likely face, yet, in China, concerns about surveillance add an additional complication to rapport-building (Ryan and Tynen 2020). Given my background, it was often obvious when Chinese informants did not want to pursue certain lines of inquiry. My research is not particularly controversial, so instances of reluctance were rare, but knowing how to respond appropriately to subtle cues and comments helped to quickly build trust. Speaking Chinese (however imperfectly) and taking part in social rituals such as group dinners also helped to open many doors. Chinese interlocutors working in academia were also familiar with the data-collection process and broadly supportive of my research efforts, to which they could relate themselves.

Among fellow international students, however, gauging true opinions proved rather more perplexing. Differences in culture, class, race, age, gender, personal/academic interests, and national origins raised a variety of complicating factors when it came to understanding their experiences in China. At the master's level, many of the international students I met were young and not particularly engaged with Chinese society outside campus, which meant that asking about their perceptions and attitudes often elicited inconclusive answers. Even more perplexing, 'younger' students (those in their mid to late twenties) would regularly contradict their own previous statements. Were they afraid to tell me their real feelings? Were they just telling me what they thought I wanted to hear, or what they thought they *should* say? Did such inconsistencies indicate a lack of trust? In studies based on survey data, everything seemed so simple.

For They Know Not?

Two MA students whom I will call 'Samir' and 'Alma' provide examples of these dynamics. When I first met Samir, he was upbeat about studying in China, but he did not speak Chinese and had difficulties with basic tasks such as finding culturally appropriate (that is, Halal) food on the remote satellite campus where he was living. In further discussions, he revealed that he struggled to understand course materials written in English and frequently did not understand his Chinese lecturers either. Alma noted similar challenges with comprehension: she had previously failed at least one subject and often seemed confused about the academic and administrative requirements of our host university. Given they faced such obstacles, I wanted to know more about their motivations to study in China and what they hoped to achieve in the future.

Once we sat down to an interview, however, both students were keen to downplay the difficulties they had previously mentioned. Everything was fine in China and at our host university, they assured me. After a few perfunctory exchanges, I switched off my recorder and Alma quickly returned to sharing her frustrations with university life. When I remarked on this to her, she laughed sheepishly and put her head on the table in mock apology, which suggested that she also recognised the contradiction. As much as I was concerned with getting at the 'truth' of these students' stories, I found it much more interesting to consider *why* I was being presented with such discrepant accounts.

At my host university, there were several unofficial 'representatives' for the various foreign student communities. These representatives were students themselves who were distinguished by their charismatic personalities, as well as by the support they could organise for peers when other forms of assistance were difficult to access. Such 'gatekeepers' are rarely mentioned in the literature on foreign students in China, yet they can be a vital source of 'insider' community knowledge. While maintaining the anonymity of participants, I mentioned to a few de facto student leaders the difficulties I was having with collecting and interpreting interview data. Such consultations, combined with follow-up

discussions with participants themselves, revealed several possible explanations for the shifting attitudes I encountered.

On reflection, I suspect that a certain amount of male ego could explain Samir's sudden show of resilience. I was told that command of English is a marker of status and prestige in Samir's social milieu, as well as a potential source of insecurity for those who fall short of perfect fluency. Further, as a newcomer to China, he needed time to adjust to an unfamiliar environment (figuring out how to order groceries online, for instance, solved many of his food-related woes). As a young man cut off from family support structures, taking care of his own 'domestic' needs was also a novel experience that took some getting used to. For Alma, gendered cultural expectations about being agreeable and gracious likely played a factor in shaping our discussions. I later learned that Alma had serious issues with a roommate, which surely affected her academic performance and opinions of student life in China.

Being relatively disconnected from mainstream Chinese society, many younger international students may be dubious about what they are 'allowed' to say and to whom. Pursuing a degree in a foreign country is a challenging experience; the students I met were generally content to study in China, but a general unease about being perceived as 'ungrateful' means that students may also be reticent to discuss the challenges they face. I believe this was the case with Alma and Samir. Despite our shared status as foreign students at the same Chinese university, this was not sufficient to establish feelings of mutual identity. Even in our momentary occupation of a shared institutional space, our trajectories diverged in many significant respects.

As someone with a white-collar, middle-class background and a US passport, I have the privilege of knowing that other opportunities will almost certainly be available to me outside China; for a young person from the Global South who is still finding their way in the world, lost opportunities in China may be much harder to replace, especially in the context of the post-Covid economic malaise. The inconsistent responses of participants also led me to reflect on the mutability of *my own* opinions and ideas, which are certainly subject to change based on mood and circumstance. On this general state of ambivalence, I quote one student leader: 'Don't worry; they [the

participants] don't know themselves. They have two minds about everything!' Such statements could just as easily be levelled against me.

This brief intervention suggests two points: first, that care should be taken to appreciate the specific social, cultural, and personal backgrounds of international students to contextualise their experiences in China; and second, that shared 'outsider' status will not necessarily lead to shared feelings of 'insiderness'. My privileged positionality as a white male from a developed country may help explain my naivety, but, given that experiences such as mine rarely appear in the methodological literature, I can only conclude that my assumptions are shared by others. The views and opinions of students can frequently change, but contradictions are not 'errors' per se, and are not reducible to fears about censure as one finds in the Chinese Studies community. Studying abroad can be a fraught experience in any context and such experiences should be considered in relationship to the realities of contemporary China.

II. Under the Gaze: Reflections on Conducting Fieldwork as a Female Researcher in China

Mengyao LI

For researchers engaged in qualitative studies across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, human geography, and other social sciences, fieldwork is a seemingly compulsory part of the research journey. It not only facilitates a nuanced understanding of the world through immersive communication but can also help to cultivate a spirit of reflection and critique. My reflections on the emotions and struggles generated by my fieldwork experiences resonate with more general perplexities about being a female working on China's environmental issues. As a female researcher pursuing a PhD in human geography and someone long committed to promoting inclusive and sustainable development, I staunchly oppose any form of gendered discipline placed on researchers and

research participants. As a young woman from China's one-child generation, my education and individualistic values emphasise my own will and initiative. In my role as a practitioner working on environmental protection in China, I face both advantages and challenges, as well as tensions and discomforts, stemming from my identity as a professional and a woman.

By discussing the different gazes I encountered during my fieldwork in post-Covid China, my essay endeavours to unpack the emotional challenges I experienced while conducting fieldwork as a female researcher in remote rural areas. Ultimately, this article seeks to draw the attention of the Chinese Studies community to the discomfort and obstacles faced by early career female scholars conducting research in China, fostering dialogue and introspection under a pervasive male gaze and societal expectations rooted in traditional gender norms. The emotional challenges I experienced during my fieldwork spurred me to reflect on my identity as a professional researcher and feminist, and to rethink the role of female researchers in speaking out for other, more marginalised women.

Access to the Field under a Suspicious Gaze

As I stood in the suffocating air, my thoughts drifted back to a year earlier. In my first-year PhD methodology course, I learned that, for qualitative researchers, fieldwork can help us understand the world through constructive dialogue and cultivate a spirit of reflection and criticism. However, as far as I could recall, none of the training I received taught me how to deal with the suspicious gaze of my participants.

'Reality is a lot more complicated than books,' the village head said to me, as he stood in front of a red propaganda banner in his office. His impatient voice broke the silence. Even though I had tried to appear more serious by swapping my feminine dress for a plain suit, not wearing makeup, and putting on glasses, this middle-aged man with the power to refuse my fieldwork request made me feel shaky and sweaty, my heart beating fast. 'I have hosted a lot of experts and researchers, but they just stay for one or two days,' he continued, 'so what you said about staying here for two months is impossible, especially

since you are a young woman alone.' Unexpectedly, the referral call I had worked hard to get from his acquaintance did not make it easier to build trust with him in this remote community in rural China.

To some extent, I understood his scepticism, especially in early 2023, when Covid-19 restrictions had just been lifted after three years of stringent controls. As both gatekeeper and village head, he was wedged between administrative duties focused on 'stability maintenance' and his role in promoting the local community's post-epidemic recovery. To him, I was merely an outsider, unfamiliar with local culture, traditions, and beliefs, and someone who potentially could even get him into trouble. This decline in trust was also evidenced by Aassve et al. (2021), who stated that the pandemic disrupted social exchanges and widened the distance between people. The suspicious gaze I encountered mirrors the experience of my friends and colleagues who have been conducting research in post-Covid China: regardless of how strictly we adhere to research ethics protocols and avoid questions that could be construed as sensitive, our in-depth interviews with rural villagers are now routinely accompanied by circumspect questioning and sometimes deep suspicion.

The village head said he would discuss my request with his superiors and asked me to return to the field site the next day. I had never been more depressed since I started my fieldwork. When I returned to my accommodation that day, I decided to clarify anything that could be considered sensitive by this village head. I prepared a supplementary letter explaining the purpose of my fieldwork and clarifying its relevance to local communities. My intention was to convince the village head by showing respect for the community and an understanding of local knowledge and culture. In this letter, I also tried to consciously present the objectives of my activities and find connections with the Chinese Government's rhetoric, such as that about an Ecological Civilisation (生态文明) and Rural Revitalisation (乡村振兴), to show my conformity with China's development policies and demonstrate that I was not an outsider in the nation. I also tried to allay his concerns about my female identity by mentioning that a family member would accompany me during my stay, and by listing the many field research activities I had carried out in rural China. I did not reveal my feminist identity or challenge his patriarchal judgement of me. In the end, it worked. Early the next

day, I received a call from him saying he welcomed me to conduct fieldwork in the village and would like to assist. This challenging experience illustrates that a crucial step for successful entry into the field is establishing rapport and building trust with the gatekeepers, especially those in positions of power.

When I later reviewed this letter and my subsequent research activities, I realised that to ‘fit in’ and build rapport with the local community, I had disguised myself to make others feel comfortable with my presence. The gaze to which I was subject prompted me to ask myself why I was drawn to certain questions and why I emotionally connected with certain participants and responses. We know that, during fieldwork, relationships between researchers and participants are dynamic, evolving, and negotiated; managing the distance between the researcher and the participant is a continuous process. Although feminist researchers emphasise reciprocity, empathy, equality, and rapport in the field of research (Wolf 2018), I do not think this means we must hide our feelings and always conform. As time went on, I actively communicated with local people, learned about their culture and history, shared my own experiences and feelings, and recorded my opinions and emotions in my field journal. These reflections helped to make me more aware of my own values, attitudes, interests, and demands, shaped my identity as a researcher, and served as the basis for my storytelling and analysis. My very descriptive and graffiti-filled field notes allowed me to ‘step back’ from the situation and generate new insights based on the different emotions I was feeling at that time.

Interviews under the Male Gaze

In the past few years there has been an increased awareness of the challenges that women encounter in the field that are unique to their gender (Johnson 2018). During my first round of fieldwork exploring multi-stakeholder participation in water governance, I conducted several interviews with grassroots participants, not initially targeting specific genders. However, I soon observed clear gender disparities in interviewees’ awareness about and efforts to protect

water, alongside an ignorance of the role of gender in the political and social settings of water governance. To better understand the mechanisms of participation, I decided to conduct a second round of fieldwork focusing on female participants. As a female researcher, I had relatively easy access to these subjects. In addition to in-depth interviews with women, including environmental activists, scholars, local villagers, and LGBTQI people, I actively participated in several events and activities organised by some of these women to observe and maintain relations with them. The differences between my first and second rounds of fieldwork were stark.

During my first round of fieldwork, the majority of participants were male and in leadership positions in government and local committees. I encountered frequent questions about why I was doing a PhD instead of getting married. While I was not unprepared for gendered threats and risks, deliberately being less feminine in appearance did not spare me from implicit sexism. The intense focus on my marital status, age, and family, rather than my professionalism and academic achievements, made me very uncomfortable. Nevertheless, I forced myself to keep smiling during interviews, deliberately ignoring the disrespect and discrimination. As a feminist researcher, I was ashamed of these self-protection strategies and my deliberate avoidance of conflict and scolded myself for internalising the male gaze and traditional patriarchal norms (Cai 2019).

In China, women who remain single beyond a certain age are stigmatised as ‘leftover women’ and those with a doctorate may be labelled as ‘the third gender’. Well-educated women are stereotyped as aloof, unattractive, and a threat to men (Li 2023). The place where I conducted my fieldwork was also deeply influenced by Confucianism, the core values of which include filial piety, ancestor worship, the benevolent authority of parents, and a hierarchical order based on gender and age. Even public discourses in mainstream media emphasise the fact that, by embodying these virtues, individuals can cultivate their loyalty to the state (Huang 2023). This partly explains the expectations imposed on me during my fieldwork, such as ‘family first, career second’ and ‘return to your home country to fulfil filial piety and serve the motherland’. As someone who emphasises my own will and agency, I am disgusted by discourses

that only prioritise women's familial obligations and try to discipline women through constructing an 'ideal femininity'.

The gazes I encountered during my fieldwork reflect a society that expects women to act and behave in certain ways according to stereotypes, including in academic research. Growing attention and scholarship are needed to understand the role of emotions during fieldwork, and to identify the structural impediments of the damaging gender stereotyping of female researchers. I hope my reflections convey a message to all female scholars researching environmental issues in China to embrace our genuine emotions and take every obstacle as a learning moment and a step towards a more equal and inclusive society.

III. An 'Outsider' Local Resident: Doing Fieldwork in the Hometown

Yuzong CHEN

My PhD research focuses on how China's river chief system is impacting water governance. My fieldwork involves interviews in my hometown with officials from various departments related to this system. Many scholars have noted that interviewing officials in China can be challenging, particularly for foreign scholars (Berlin 2019; Harlan 2019). Difficulties arise from distinct interviewing styles (Scoggins 2014; Solinger 2006; Wei 2023), as well as the availability of *guanxi* (关系) to facilitate interviews (Liang and Lu 2006; Tan et al. 2023). *Guanxi* refers to the 'informal and particularistic' interpersonal connections in China (Chen and Chen 2004: 306). It is well understood that good *guanxi* is a critical factor for building trust and support to do business or conduct fieldwork (Chen and Chen 2004; Li et al. 2023).

It is typical for scholars to explain such challenges with an insider-outsider binary. As noted by Katyal and King (2011) and Gao (1996), people are less likely to share with strangers accounts of misbehaviour and wrongdoing. Barriers between outsiders and insiders are said to be removed with the help of intermediaries, such as friends of the insiders (Cui 2015). The

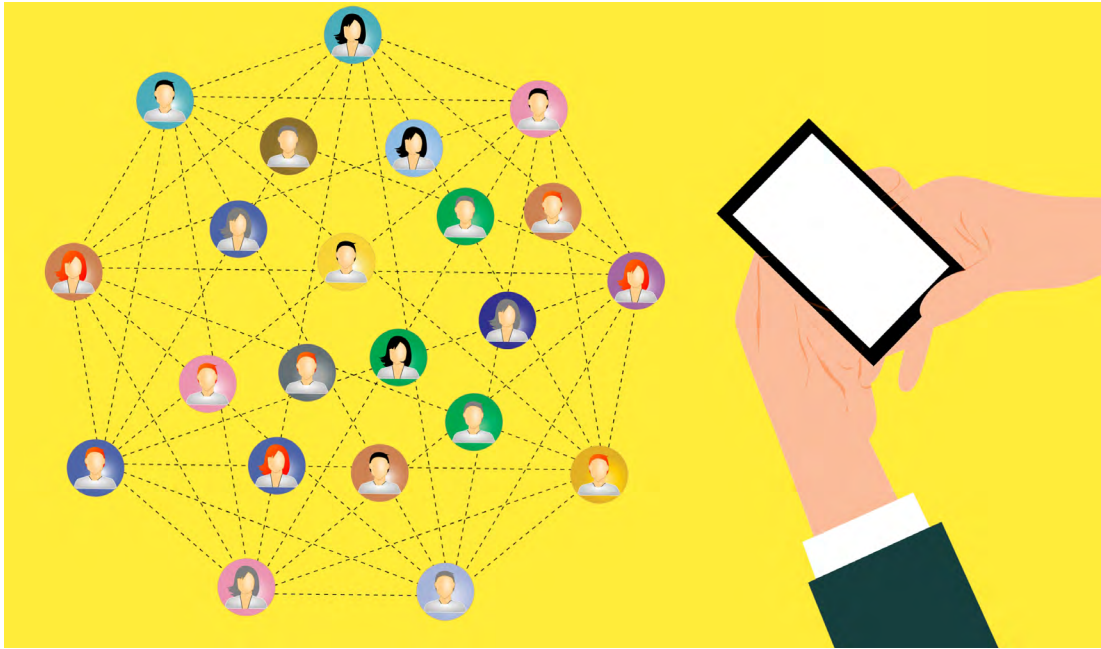
key message from the literature is that an 'insider' identity with *guanxi* is important to access informants and conduct fruitful interviews. However, what I wish to emphasise is that the insider-outsider binary is never absolute. An outsider can become an insider and an insider can become an outsider, with one's identity changing in different spaces and times as well as depending on the views of the spectators (Ergun and Erdemir 2010; Paechter 2013; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2013).

This essay discusses the challenges I faced when interviewing officials in post-Covid China, even though I was doing fieldwork in my own hometown. I want to use my experience to show how doing fieldwork in post-pandemic China is, as Harlan (2019: 117) notes, 'sensitive but possible and important'.

Entering the Field with Guanxi after the Pandemic

Guanxi remains an important way of facilitating fieldwork in China and is critical to gaining access to government officials (Li et al. 2023; Tan et al. 2023; Tu 2014). As a local resident, I used the *guanxi* of one of my relatives to gain access to my initial target interviewees. This relative works inside the government and has friends in the department in which I wanted to conduct interviews, so he effectively became the gatekeeper for my research. All my interviewees knew me as his relative who was doing a PhD. However, post pandemic, rising geopolitical tensions have escalated existing suspicions about potentially hostile overseas institutions (Rizvi 2023). This can be a source of distrust even for people with insider connections such as myself, as I discuss below.

My first interview was not very successful. With the help of my gatekeeper, I made an appointment with my interviewee, a river chief (that is, a secretary of the subdistrict government), explaining to him on the phone that my research was related to the implementation of the river chief system at the local level and asking for his consent to be interviewed. I later met him and another official in a meeting room. The first question they asked me was: 'Which *danwei* [work unit] are you from?' After learning that I was from an overseas university, they showed caution and confusion, asking me why I was researching



关系, Source: Mohamed Hassan (CC).

China if I worked for a foreign academic institution. The second official even asked why I had chosen a foreign university.

After I presented them with my questions, the river chief said to me: 'It is good to meet you and the questions are interesting. I would invite my colleague here to answer them because I don't want any misunderstanding. My son also studied abroad: how's your experience there?' My interview then became a casual chat and I failed to return to my questions about local policy implementation. During this chat, on one hand, I was trying to take advantage of my local identity to 'break the ice' and build trust by sharing common local stories; on the other, the officials were emphasising my identity as an overseas student by constantly reminding me to 'be careful about the information you collect from us', while shirking all my questions. I felt uncomfortable as I did not understand how my learning experience overseas could have become a reason for distrust.

I eventually started my 'interview' with the official, who discussed the river chief implementation process but did not directly answer any of my questions. When I mentioned some studies on various

implementation challenges done by a think tank affiliated with the Ministry of Water Resources, he told me: 'You're just a student, so you don't know; some of the experts and researchers are the "Stinking Old Ninth" [臭老九], they only know one aspect of the issue but don't know the general picture.' The 'Stinking Old Ninth' is a euphemism used during the Cultural Revolution to describe intellectuals (Howard and Smith 2020). When I asked the official whether he could explain the role of each department within the river chief system (RCS), his response was: 'I can send a document which contains the responsibility of each department in the RCS, but I can only send it to his [my relative's] phone on the government communication system.' This was an 'easier' way than showing me internal documents directly as there would be a username as a watermark on the system and they did not want their names on the system. Here was a clear boundary between insider and outsider, as insiders understood the consequences of sharing information with unauthorised outsiders. Giving me the information on my relative's phone (with his name on the watermark) could minimise these risks.

The other interview that was telling was one to which my gatekeeper accompanied me. The interviewee was a senior official from the county-level Water Resources Bureau, and he was accompanied by two officials from the local river chief office. During the interview, my gatekeeper introduced me as a PhD student from a domestic university (where I was part of a visiting program) and no further questions about my background were asked. Unlike the previous interview, I was able to ask what I wanted and at the end the official even gave me his WeChat ID and said that I should not hesitate to contact him if I had any further questions. The two other officials present gave me some supplementary information and shared non-sensitive materials.

Power and Trust in Data Collection

Interviewing officials in China at their workplace presents a challenging power dynamic between the researcher and interviewees. For one, the workplace can provide interviewees with a dominant position in the interview. In my first interview experience, the encounter was dominated by the interviewees, with multiple barriers to information-sharing. The researcher's identity is both 'given' and 'formed' by the interviewees—a dynamic that can affect trust-building. Even though I stated that I was not only a researcher from an overseas university but also a local resident born in the area, they regarded me primarily as a student, looking down at me as junior to them and poorly informed. Paradoxically, by conforming to this identity they created for me, I was able to collect data. Rather than being seen as part of the 'Stinking Old Ninth', as a student, I was allowed to remain and keep the communication going. Even when I made mistakes—for instance, asking questions that they saw as stupid—this did not impair the data-collection process. However, this identity remained complicated by my overseas connection (which at times exceeded my capital as a local with good *guanxi*) and by the physical and digital barriers between insiders and outsiders. In instances where interviewees did not dominate, I occupied a complex position as part-insider. For instance, in my second interview, the staff in the office considered me an insider who

'worked' for my gatekeeper. Through this process of 'subjectivation' (Wang 2024), I had to conform to, or be coopted into, the norms of government.

Conformity plays a key role in moving from outsider to insider status when interviewing officials. My first interview challenged my previously optimistic views of *guanxi* and revealed how complex interviewing officials in China can be. *Guanxi* does, to some extent, facilitate the research in terms of finding participants but may not be the 'panacea' that ultimately shapes trust and power dynamics in interviews. As noted by Slater (2022), uncomfortable experiences can generate new connections, which in my case meant that conforming to power relations and accepting the identities given to me by my interviewees allowed me to form a relationship with my informants.

To conclude, doing fieldwork in China and interviewing officials are deeply challenging in the post-pandemic context, but feasible if you have the right *guanxi*; however, trust-building with officials in the field cannot depend on *guanxi* alone. The officials in the middle rank of the government structure—that is, at the township and county levels—are important sources of information as they are the key actors in local policy implementation. They are also hard to access most of the time. *Guanxi* might not always support access, and one's insider-outsider status must be constantly negotiated. Conformity becomes an important and alternative way to effectively communicate with these key informants and continue to gain insights into the nature of local governance and politics in China.

Conclusion

Through these three short reflective accounts of our fieldwork journeys in post-Covid China, we present three different experiences that offer new insights into how to reboot qualitative fieldwork in China after the pandemic. Zac's experience shows the complex dynamics at play between insider and outsider within a Chinese university, and how understanding of 'insiderness' varies between different outsiders. Mengyao's case reveals how gender becomes an unexpected challenge during fieldwork in rural China under the masculine gaze and how conformity could be an effective strategy to navigate the situation. Yuzong's

experience indicates that being local and having *guanxi*—two conditions that are known to facilitate fieldwork in China—may not always work well when it comes to interviewing government officials and emphasises the importance of conforming to interviewees' expectations in terms of identity. All the discomforts and challenges we discussed aim to highlight the fact that China-based fieldwork is challenging not only for foreign researchers but also for domestic scholars. Ultimately, as noted by Pillow (2003), there is no transcendent and cosy endpoint for qualitative research, just the 'uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research'. The 'messy' examples we provide bear this out. ■



Detail of an event poster designed by a volunteer named Wei, a long-term ally for disability rights and a practitioner in the non-profit sector in China.

Gender and Disability in China

The Rise of Female-Led Disabled Persons' Organisations

Luanjiao HU, Ling HAN

Thanks to the popularity of digital platforms, feminism, and disabled women's increased educational attainment, an increasing number of female-led disabled persons' organisations (DPOs) focusing on disability inclusion has emerged in mainland China—a welcome change in a movement that has traditionally been male-led. This essay details the history, emergence, and characteristics of these organisations in China, as well as the challenges they currently face. It then presents the reflexive case of one female-led DPO in which one of the authors played a prominent role, as a lens through which to understand the broader movement.

In recent years, thanks to the popularity of digital platforms, an increasing number of female-led disabled persons' organisations (DPOs) focusing on disability inclusion has emerged in mainland China. This growth marks a welcome change from the traditional male dominance of such organisations.

While multiple definitions of DPOs exist, in this essay, we view DPOs as organisations or networks that are primarily led and staffed or supported by disabled persons. The role of DPOs includes 'providing a voice of their own, identifying needs, expressing views on priorities, evaluating services and advocating change and public awareness' (UN 1982). They also 'provide the opportunity to develop skills in the negotiation process, organizational abilities, mutual support, information-sharing and often vocational skills and opportunities' (UN 1982). While recent years have seen the popularisation of the international disability rights movement and the promotion of the mantra 'nothing about us without us', visible DPOs remain rare in China. DPOs led by disabled women are even rarer. Critics have noted that in some international DPOs, power is often concentrated among a few men, leading to some members, especially women, experiencing bullying, harassment, and unequal treatment (Fremlin 2024). This also applies in China, where self-help groups and associations led by disabled women often face additional challenges related to limited visibility and scarce resources.

To quote just a couple of examples, in 2002, a rural woman named Chen Yuying founded a self-help organisation supporting local marginalised populations, especially disabled people. Chen had acquired multiple disabilities in the late 1990s while a migrant worker in a Shenzhen-based factory. While still around after more than two decades, her organisation has been struggling with limited resources. Another instance of a pioneering organisation is the Guangzhou-based grassroots Association of Disabled Women (广州残疾妇女协会), which does not have much visibility at the national level. The Association of Women with Disabilities Hong Kong (AWDHK, 香港女障協進會) was founded in 2000 but unfortunately disbanded in June 2022 due to the inability to form a new executive committee (AWDHK 2022).

These early female-led DPOs were established before the widespread use of digital media and their reach and impact remained largely local. Enabled by digital platforms, broader networks among disabled

people have become possible, operating at a national and even international level. For example, after the shocking and tragic death of a disabled child in Hubei Province in 2020 (Chen 2020), digital disability support networks were quickly formed to provide mutual support for disabled people in need during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dai and Hu 2022). Even before the pandemic, people with disabilities in China had begun to adopt remote learning and digital tools due to the lack of accessible infrastructure—a development that accelerated in the Covid years among both people with disabilities and their non-disabled counterparts. As Huang (2021: 87) observed: ‘[V]ibrant online community networks have started to grow among the new generation of people with disability, paving the way for a collective disability consciousness-building from the grassroots community.’

Amid the growing disability-consciousness movement enabled by digitalisation, a new generation of female-led DPOs has been active and influential in raising disability awareness and organising communities in China. These female-led DPOs are initiated by Chinese disabled women who are based in major cities in China or living overseas. Many founders are highly educated and have been educated overseas. Their organisations aim to build communities (many specifically hope to empower disabled girls and women through targeted programming), share resources, and challenge disability and gender stigma from traditional male-led DPOs. This essay documents the emergence of a few disabled women community leaders and their networks in China and globally, detailing their history and impact. It is followed by an in-depth discussion of the reflexive case of one female-led DPO in which one of the authors played a prominent role, presented as a lens through which to understand the broader movement.

Precursors

The early female-led DPOs that we discuss in this essay have connections with the most influential DPO in China, the One Plus One Disability Group (1+1, 一加一残障公益集团). Established in 2006 by Xie Yan, a Beijing-based man who acquired a physical disability in his late twenties, this group is the pioneering and most well-known DPO in mainland

China. While most of its members and management team are disabled individuals, the organisation is male dominated and in 2016 transitioned to a partnership governance system under which all four managing partners are men. Nevertheless, this group’s impact on the disability movement is undeniable, and many disabled individuals started their organisations and networks after participating in and working with 1+1.

Two 1+1 female employees with visual impairments, Jin Ling and Xiao Jia, were among the earliest to start community-building efforts with disabled women in China in the early 2010s under the aegis of this organisation, establishing a network they called the Disability Associated Women Support Group (DAWS, 受残障影响女性支持小组). Xiao, who is blind, is married to Cai Cong, another blind activist and co-founder of 1+1. Jin Ling and Xiao Jia both left 1+1 due to pregnancy and childcare commitments. In 2016, Peng Yujiao, a woman with cerebral palsy, joined 1+1 and took over their work. Building on Jin and Xiao’s efforts, Peng expanded the DAWS network significantly. Peng focused on capacity-building with disabled women in different cities and organised online events featuring disabled women speakers. For example, she connected with the first author of this essay, Luanjiao Hu, inviting her to join the network and share her life experience as a disabled woman.

For various reasons including differences with the organisation’s leaders over funding allocation, Peng left 1+1 at the end of 2016 and began working independently. Influenced by Chinese feminist activists, Peng aimed to incorporate feminist principles into her community work with disabled women. Inspired by a documentary featuring acid attack victims in India, in 2017, Peng collaborated with another disabled woman, named Yaoyao, to produce *Han Ya* (寒鸦), an impactful documentary featuring disabled women in mainland China and Hong Kong. Peng and Yaoyao eventually co-founded their own DPO, the Beijing Enable Sister Centre (BEST, 北京残障姐妹), also known as 北京乐益融社会工作事务所, which was successfully registered as a social service organisation in 2019. Due to differing programming priorities and other factors, the two founders have recently parted ways and now lead separate organisations. Meanwhile, the DAWS network under 1+1 also intermittently resumed some programs and activities nationwide, led by different employees of the organisation (One Plus One 2020).

Table 1: Names and Information of Six Key Female-Led DPOs

	Name	Year	Founder and other characteristics
1	Minority Voice (少数派说)	2016	Co-founded by two disabled women, one living in the United States and one in mainland China.
2	Beijing Enable Sister Centre (BEST, 北京残障姐妹, also known as 北京乐益融社会工作事务所)	2019	Co-founded by two disabled women. Divided into two organisations in 2024 due to the parting of the two founders.
3	Rare N Roll (奇途无障碍)	2018	Founded by a Nanjing-based disabled woman, a wheelchair user, with an international education background.
4	Disability Without Borders (DWB)	2018	Founded by a disabled woman with international education background, currently living in the United States. Supported mostly by women, with an international focus.
5	Chongqing-based Know Deaf Social Work Service Centre (重庆两江新区知珙社会工作服务中心)	2021	Founded by a Chongqing-based deaf woman. Currently staffed entirely by women, with about 65 per cent of the staff having disabilities.
6	Tong Guan Network (同关社群)	2022	Founded by a Shanghai-based disabled woman, a wheelchair user and influencer. Supported by two paid disabled women; all network members identify as disabled, with 77 per cent identifying as physically disabled and 67 per cent being disabled women.

Along with DAWS and BEST, several other female-led DPOs emerged in recent years, including Minority Voice (少数派说), Rare N Roll (奇途无障碍), Disability Without Borders (DWB), Know Deaf Social Work Service Centre (重庆两江新区知珙社会工作服务中心), and Tong Guan Network (同关社群). Table 1 provides some additional details about these DPOs. Their founders share some commonalities. First, all were born in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Second, all have a high level of education—at least a bachelor’s degree, some have master’s degrees, and two are PhD holders. Third, most also have international education experiences and have benefited from this. Fourth, most have physical disabilities, and one has multiple disabilities (physical and hearing). These founders are generally well connected and often collaborate with one another, sharing resources and supporting each other to amplify their work. They also maintain strong networks, which foster ongoing collaboration to advance disability inclusion.

Intersectionality

Women’s groups often blend familiar organisational models, such as clubs, community-building efforts, and decentralised networks, to create new and effective forms of mobilisation (Clemens 1993). These alternative models can foster identity formation and social solidarity, helping minority participants overcome challenges (Minkoff 2002). These organisations are coalitions in which diverse identities often clash and reconcile. Participants face ‘multiple jeopardy’ due to structural inequalities tied to their social position and intersectional identities (Ward 2004; Luna 2016). This tension can be addressed through ‘tacit or explicit creative acts’ of identity work for potential coalition-building (Carastathis 2013). Thus, women’s organisations often emphasise the importance of one’s voice in fostering a sense of ‘groupness’ (Dugan and Reger 2006).

These characteristics of women's organisations can be observed in the female-led DPOs in China. Disabled women often face multiple challenges in negotiating their intersectional identities of being disabled and a woman, both in their life trajectory and in their activism (Hu 2023; Zhang et al. 2023). In the case of Xiao Jia and Jin Ling, the two blind women working at 1+1, motherhood impacted on their organising capacities and career pathways. Both paused their community work with disabled women due to pregnancy and childcare responsibilities. In contrast, Cai Cong, Xiao's husband and colleague, experienced no career interruption from fatherhood. All the disabled women community leaders with whom we have connected have shared their experiences of intersectional struggles as one of the motivations they had to start their DPO. In her book on the experience of Chinese women with physical disabilities, the first author of this essay revealed how gendered expectations and challenges in romantic relationships pressured her into undergoing a voluntary below-knee amputation, to try to conform to gender norms and express femininity (Hu 2024).

Disabled women face intersectional struggles throughout various life stages, such as schooling, employment, and motherhood. These challenges can become sources of motivation and unique strengths in their community work and organising efforts. Inspired by their connections with the disability community and, in some cases, digital feminism, disabled women have begun creating their own

platforms, organisations, or networks to address their needs. For example, after leaving 1+1, Xiao launched a WeChat public account called 'Non-Visual Aesthetics' (非视觉美学), through which she educates visually impaired women on topics such as beauty, health, cooking, and parenting. Although Xiao lacks higher education credentials, she has become an influencer in the blind women's community through her work in DPOs and her background in disability advocacy. The distinct gendered experiences of disabled women influence the structure and focus of their organisations.

The Path to Disability Advocacy

At the time of writing, more female-led DPOs are emerging. Rising gender awareness and digital feminism among younger generations have empowered some disabled women to create their own communities or become influencers. To offer a glimpse into the process that leads some disabled women to engage in this type of activism, we share the case of Disability Without Borders (DWB) in a narrative first-person account of the lead author's personal experiences as a community organiser. The case illustrates that disabled women are not born activists or advocates but evolve into this role through lived experiences.

Reflecting on my journey, I understand how I have slowly become the disabled scholar and advocate I am today. Born in rural China, I acquired a physical disability while I was an infant. I lost most of my left foot, and gradually my legs became different lengths due to uneven usage. There was no information or resources about physical therapy or prosthetic devices in the rural environment where I grew up. I walked unevenly without assistive devices until age 15. Growing up in a rural village and later migrating to a small city in southern China, I was surrounded by a predominantly non-disabled world. I played with non-disabled peers and attended mainstream schools where most of the school children did not have visible disabilities. Being one of the few students with a visible disability, I was often highlighted as an inspirational model for excelling academically despite my physical condition. However, some teachers explicitly excluded and neglected me due to my disability, gender, and rural background. To excel academically was the unquestioned responsibility of a disabled student. Perhaps because my parents understood the challenges of being a disabled girl in an ableist Chinese society, they decided to provide me with a better education than my two sisters. They sent me to a more expensive and better-resourced local school where I continued to thrive academically.

I accumulated mixed disability experiences, both positive and negative. I grew up in an environment in which disability was seen as pitiable and undesirable—a perception that deeply shaped my experiences. In my teenage years, I disliked the idea of acquiring an official disability certificate because owning such a certificate symbolises officially accepting a label commonly perceived as negative. I eventually obtained one after being admitted into a university because my then low-income family heard about some monetary reward from local disabled persons' federations for disabled students entering higher education. It was a one-time fund of CNY500 (about US\$69), which I had to share with a disabled uncle, who accompanied me to the local disability agency. To me, the benefits of acquiring an official disability certificate barely outweighed the negatives. I hid it as soon as I received it.

In China, the individual and medical models of disability have long dominated public perceptions, and this remains true today. These models view disability as an individual defect or fault, a medical problem requiring treatment and a cure for achieving normalcy and inclusion in society. In my 24 years living in a rural village and small city in southern China, I had never encountered alternative perspectives on disability.

At 24, I embarked on a journey of international education after I was accepted into a US graduate school. I had chosen the path of international education largely because of my experience as a disabled girl and woman. My gender status, combined with my disability experience, affected my decision to move away from my birth country. As a young girl living away from migrant worker parents, I, along with other girls in the village, unfortunately experienced sexual abuse and harassment from local adult men. Eager for a more equal environment, I pursued further education in the United States and was fortunate to gain admission to a graduate program after two years of applying.

My graduate school studies gave me space to reflect on my experiences in a different language (English). It exposed me to different disability narratives and literature. In graduate school, I was shocked to learn about how different lives with disabilities could be in another country and setting. I got deeply involved in an introductory course on disability at my university. It was eye-opening to discover the many possibilities available for disabled people. My exposure to different disabled lives in books and real life, along with the space to reflect on my previous disability and gendered experiences, became the start of a transformative journey. In 2015, I was invited to give a TEDx talk in which I shared my research on disability and education with critical reflections on my own experiences.

Around 2017, I came in contact with a Chinese disability advocate named Cai Cong, after his remarks on disability went viral following his appearance on a popular TV show (*The Weirdos Speak*, 奇葩说). I connected with Cai via his social media account, and our shared commitment to disability inclusion sparked a long-lasting camaraderie. Cai generously opened a door for me to understand and appreciate the work of disability advocates in China and his organisation, 1+1, the most influential DPO in China. Being connected to Cai and 1+1 was one of the key events in my involvement in the Chinese disability field. I continued researching and educating myself on issues related to Chinese disabled people. In 2018, I was awarded a selective fellowship that enhanced my leadership skills and deepened my connections with other disabled organisers. In the same year, I founded the Disability Without Borders (DWB) network.

A conversation with a fellow disabled woman activist named Ji Xun directly inspired me to create the DWB network. Started in July 2018, DWB has grown into an international network with close to 700 diverse members worldwide, all sharing an interest in disability inclusion in China and internationally. DWB members come from diverse backgrounds, including varying disability status and severity, disciplines and fields of work, geographic origin, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and gender identity, and nationality. The network comprises advocates, activists, academics, students, professionals, government workers, disabled community members, and

family members of disabled individuals. It remains an invitation-only network based on the WeChat platform. WeChat's popularity and dominance, along with restricted internet access in China, make building accessible communities on other platforms nearly impossible. Chinese internet users cannot easily access social media platforms, including Google, YouTube, LinkedIn, Meta (previously Facebook), X (previously Twitter), and Instagram. As a result, Chinese internet users cannot use common social media websites for community groups.

The DWB network has been managed by a quasi-advisory committee of community members since 2020. The committee currently has six members, five of whom have disabilities. The committee provides suggestions and rotates the network manager position to a new member every July. DWB supports disability inclusion and community organisation in four ways: information and resource-sharing, event organisation (online and offline), hot-topic discussions, and connection-building.

DWB members generously share global and local disability-related information to which they have access and support disabled people in numerous ways. The DWB network also hosts speaker series, professional development events, documentary screenings, and encourages member meetups offline. Some DWB members have facilitated such in-person gatherings in different Chinese cities.

DWB has its limitations, one of which stems from the intersectional challenges I personally encounter. As a researcher, mother, immigrant, spouse in an intercultural relationship, and disabled person, I struggle to balance my responsibilities and self-care needs while engaging in transnational disability activism. This intersectional challenge is shared by disabled women activists worldwide, highlighting an issue common beyond China (Galer 2023; Heumann and Joiner 2020).

There are unique strengths in female-led DPOs, too. Intersectional life experiences can be sources of motivation and catalysts for community connection. As a DPO led by a disabled woman, DWB encourages and amplifies the work, voices, and achievements of its female members. As the leader, I understand the common invisibility of female voices in traditional organisations. DWB also receives substantial support from women volunteers and continually attracts female community members who actively engage in and contribute to community-building. These could all potentially serve as empowering mechanisms to foster the growth of other women leaders and inspire them to start their own community organising or leadership initiatives.

A New Generation of Community Leaders

In this essay and the personal narrative it includes, we have discussed the rise of community leaders among disabled women and the development of their organisations and networks in China. We have shown how many female-led DPOs have been established in recent years by well-educated and empowered disabled women. This surge is partly due to the accessibility of digital platforms such as WeChat, which enable national and international network-building. Those with overseas experience often advocate for inclusive practices and share their international knowledge and information with their communities. The higher education attainment, increased

awareness of feminism, and social connectedness of disabled women also drive them to form communities, sharing ways to lead more fulfilling lives. The unique intersectional struggles faced by disabled women, distinct from those faced by men, not only motivate them to start their organisations and networks but also provide insights and opportunities to better connect with different community members.

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Is China Winning Hearts and Minds among Global South Students?

Graduation photo of a Master's Program in Public Administration, specific to students from the Global South. Source: Reagan Kapilya, taken in 2023.

Yue HOU

With significant investment in global outreach, the Chinese State has been aiming to ‘tell the China story well’ to enhance its international image. Through original surveys and personal narratives, this essay investigates the effectiveness of China’s educational public diplomacy in winning the hearts and minds of students from the Global South who studied in China with Chinese state support. It demonstrates that these students have developed a complex and nuanced understanding of China. While most hold a favourable view of the country, appreciating its technological advancements, culture, and economic opportunities, they also offer candid criticism of the lack of political freedom, internet restrictions, the cultural exclusions they encountered, as well as negative externalities of rapid economic growth.

When Beijing Normal University economist Professor Hu Biliang, a dear friend who sadly passed away earlier this year, remarked during an interview that African students in China received an annual stipend of RMB100,000 (about US\$13,000) and that this amount was ‘not too high’, it sparked an uproar online (The Initium 2020). Many Chinese netizens suggested that the money would be much better spent supporting impoverished children in rural China. Lost on many commentators was the fact that these education programs, which enable young people from countries in the Global South to study and live in China, play a crucial role in China’s public diplomacy efforts. The real question is whether China’s money is well spent in winning the hearts and minds of the Global South youth?

My colleagues and I explored this question by studying the experiences of Global South students who have participated in these state-sponsored education programs. Some of these programs focus on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and training students from BRI countries (for instance, at Beijing Normal University's Belt and Road School), while others broadly target students from developing countries and aim to improve 'South-South cooperation' (such as Peking University's Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development). To seek answers, we conducted an original survey among more than 900 students who were enrolled in these programs between 2020 and 2023 and followed the journeys of six who were still participating at the time of our interviews in 2023. Our findings show that these Global South citizens have developed a nuanced and complex understanding of China—politically, socially, and culturally. While they are generally positive about their experiences in China, their views are not uncritical; they highlight various problems that could hinder China's attractiveness to international students and visitors, as well as its international standing.

Winning Hearts, Minds, and Tastebuds?

Reagan Kapilya comes from Zambia and has been living in China since 2017. When he was growing up, he did not know much about China but watched many kung-fu movies featuring Chinese stars such as Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Bruce Lee. Reagan decided to apply for an education program in China after one of his high school friends mentioned a visit to the country. As he told us in an interview, he was intrigued: 'China is the number two superpower, and I wanted to go and see it myself.' Following his adventurous spirit, Reagan eventually landed in Qinzhou—a small city in Guangxi Province that was unfamiliar even to many Chinese—and enrolled in a small regional college. His most memorable experience since arriving in China was an opportunity to appear in a blockbuster movie called *Formed Police Unit* (维和防暴队, 2024) alongside several famous Chinese actors, including Wang Yibo and Elaine Zhong. He described the experience as fun and noted that some of the movie stars were very nice to him.

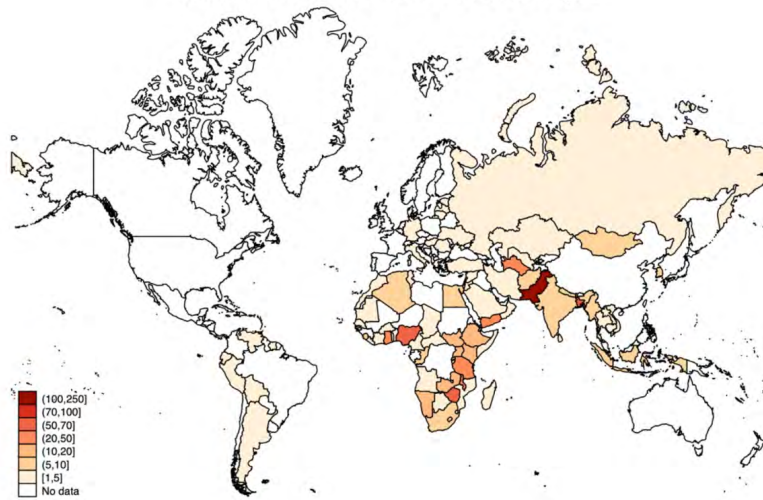
At the time of our interview in 2023, Reagan was pursuing a Master of Public Administration in Zhuhai after graduating from college in Qinzhou and felt that the program was grooming him to become an ambassador of China to his home country. He hoped to stay and work for a few years in China before returning home, although he acknowledged that China could improve how its authorities dealt with foreigners who were Black. Having lived in Guangxi and Guangdong—two coastal provinces—he had developed a taste for Chinese seafood. His favourite Chinese food was hotpot.

Reagan is among half a million international students in China. Although not traditionally known for international education, China has recently overtaken the United States and the United Kingdom as the top destination for anglophone students from Africa, even though the number might be declining since Covid (Breeze and Moore 2017). According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, in 2018 China welcomed 492,000 foreign students from 196 countries, about 12.8 per cent of whom received some form of financial support from the Chinese Government (Ministry of Education 2019). The Chinese State calls this initiative 'opening the education sector to the world' (教育对外开放) and explicitly declares that its aim is to enhance China's global influence (Ministry of Education 2020).

Has the goal been achieved? From 2021 to 2023, my research team conducted several rounds of surveys of students from the Global South enrolled in these programs. We received 907 valid responses from students from 92 countries, spanning Central, South, and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. Respondents ranged from 18 to 40 years of age, with an average age of 27 years. About 72 per cent were male, and 15 per cent had studied outside their home country before coming to China. Most of the surveyed students were enrolled in master's programs and their areas of study varied, from economics, public administration, and law to natural sciences and engineering. Only 18 per cent considered themselves to be fluent in Chinese, and 88 per cent considered themselves religious, with the majority being Muslim.

The responses were collected anonymously, and we asked the students about their opinions of and experiences in China. Among them, 87 per cent held a favourable view of the country, while only 31 per cent held a favourable view of the United States (we

International Students in the Sample



Survey coverage. Source: Yue Hou.

modelled this set of questions on the PEW survey by Silver et al. [2023]). A student from Yemen noted during a debriefing session that these results were not surprising, at least among the Middle Eastern students:

The United States has a very negative reputation in most Middle Eastern countries; China, on the other hand, is seen as mostly only involved economically, not politically, in this region ... So, the support for China might not just be among students.

We also included an open-ended question on what they liked the most about China: ‘What are three things you want to bring back home from China?’ Their responses were diverse and fun to read. Many mentioned technology, highlighting mobile payment systems and tech products (for instance, super-apps such as WeChat, delivery services such as Meituan, bike-sharing providers, etcetera) as their top choices. Others valued cultural experiences, such as food, tea, and the friendships they made, as well as the Chinese work ethic. Economic policies and outcomes were also popular, with students noting China’s poverty alleviation programs, infrastructure, and more generally, the country’s development model. Finally, some

appreciated aspects of governance, like public safety, anticorruption efforts, and ‘social management’ in general.

Because the term ‘China model’ popped up quite frequently in their answers, in a follow-up survey, we invited students to be more specific about what they mean by it. Using text analysis tools, I uncovered three key themes: first, students see the China model as a unique blend of socialism and capitalism, in which the state plays a key role in the economy. Second, they view it as particularly successful in lifting people out of poverty, driving economic prosperity, and leading technological advancements. Finally, many highlighted that the cultural element of this model is a deep-rooted commitment to hard work. While students have voiced various criticisms of China’s governance, as we will explore below, they generally had positive associations with the ‘China model’.

These answers echo communications scholar Maria Repnikova’s (2022: 50) observation that the Global South ‘embrace[s] China’s story of economic success and the idea of a shared development trajectory’. Similarly, political scientist Dan Mattingly and his co-authors (forthcoming) have noted that Chinese messages promoting its system appear successful especially around ‘growth and stability’.



Disha (a student from Bangladesh), centre, participating in a school-wide cultural event, September 2024. Source: Disha.

Given the universal popularity of Chinese food among students, we thought it would be a fun exercise to ask during our in-depth interviews what their favourite was. The top picks included: hotpot (火锅, their absolute favourite), shrimp dumplings (虾饺), kung pao chicken (宫保鸡丁), and malatang (麻辣烫). Spicy Sichuan cuisine seemed to win their tastebuds. Many Muslim students also praised Chinese universities for the provision of Halal food; most campus dining halls have a Halal counter, and some even have separate Halal dining halls (清真食堂) for domestic and international Muslim students.

'China Is the Best Place to Do Business'

While most students entered these programs 'open-minded', unfamiliar with China, and eager to explore, some came to China as 'entrepreneurial pragmatists'. For them, a student visa provides a relatively easy opportunity to enter the country compared with obtaining a work visa. These students, who often have prior work experience in trade or other industries, come to China with a clear goal: seeking business opportunities.

Malek is one such student. Hailing from Aden in Yemen, he comes from an entrepreneurial family with historical ties to China: his father did business in Guangzhou in the 1990s and his uncle also dealt with China. His family moved from Aden to Saudi Arabia in the 2000s, and he studied in India before coming to China in the 2010s. Finding China richer in business opportunities than India, he regrets not coming sooner. With a clear goal of doing business, Malek used the opportunity to pursue a master's degree in the country as a gateway to the Chinese market. Despite multiple offers from esteemed universities in various cities, he chose a university in Zhuhai for its proximity to Shenzhen and Dongguan—key international trade hubs. As a student, he began forming business relationships with Chinese factories, serving clients primarily in the Middle East. After graduation, he became a full-time businessman in international trade in China and, based on his WeChat posts, the business is going quite well.

While some students like Malek come with clear business goals in mind, others develop business interests and discover opportunities only after arriving in China. In our survey, as many as 83 per cent of the respondents were interested in finding job opportunities in China post graduation, hoping to stay in the country rather than return home immediately.

Learning to Live Inside the Great Firewall

Before coming to China to pursue a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree, Mexican student Maria spent one semester in the United Kingdom during her bachelor's degree in international business and then worked for Deloitte in Mexico after graduation. Her fascination with Chinese culture began when she was seven or eight after seeing a Chinese New Year celebration on television. In school, she was often the only one interested in China. At college, she took Chinese lessons at a Confucius Institute in Mexico City and aspired to pursue a graduate degree in China, though she kept this plan from her parents; China seemed distant and very different from Mexico, with most of her friends opting to go to North America or Europe.

Maria noted that, unlike the independent approach in UK schools, Chinese universities provide more hands-on guidance to international students. She appreciated the generous scholarships offered by Chinese programs, which were more financially accessible than those in the United Kingdom or the United States. However, she observed that Chinese professors tend to lecture without encouraging much classroom discussion, unlike in Mexico, where teachers frequently challenge students with uncomfortable questions.

Like Maria, other international students do not shy away from talking about problems and challenges in China. Internet freedom is one such issue. After arriving in China, Maria quickly adapted to the new apps and even introduced WeChat to her sister for easy communication, because it was difficult to log on to apps like WhatsApp due to government censorship and control. A student from Vietnam named Tracy also mentioned the problem of access to stable and free internet (and we got cut off on Zoom while talking!). She said that this was pretty much the 'only issue' that confronted her in China, and otherwise China felt a lot like Vietnam culturally, to the point that she had become impressively fluent in Chinese in a short period.

To ensure we received balanced feedback, we asked our respondents to list 'three things that China could improve on'. Their answers were diverse and candid. Many mentioned political rights and open-

ness, pointing out issues like media freedom, work visa restrictions, racism, and political transparency. Various downsides of economic growth were also frequently mentioned, including inequality, pollution, and the quality of growth. On a more personal level, students noted difficulties with language barriers for non-Chinese speakers and instances of racism, particularly against Black people. Also, while they enjoyed Chinese food, they felt there was a lack of variety, especially on campus.

It is worth noting that students who are more sceptical of Chinese state narratives tend to be more aware of the problems mentioned above. Unlike the 'entrepreneurial pragmatists' who plan to stay in China after graduation, these cautious sceptics are more likely to move to countries with more political freedom once they complete their education.

China as a 'Mutual Partner'

Disha, a vibrant and confident young woman from Bangladesh, was feeling the monotony of a demanding job in a law firm and sensed that she had reached a career plateau back home. Seeking a new direction, she learned about fully funded MBA programs in China from a friend and decided to give it a try. Her first semester was online due to the global pandemic, and she found the experience unsatisfactory. However, on arriving in China for her second semester, she quickly fell in love with the country.

Despite having been there for only a couple of months at the time of our interview, she was already thriving, making new Chinese friends, who took her on explorations around the city. She did find that some of her Chinese friends were less outspoken and straightforward than she and her friends back home, and she also realised quickly that there were other restrictions—for instance, on the internet. When asked whether these were problematic for her, she answered: 'Do as the Romans do, right? I am very adaptive.' She also appreciated the fact that three dining halls on campus had Halal options, and her favourite Chinese foods were chicken and shrimp dumplings in all forms: steamed, with or without soup, fried—'I love them all!' After completing her MBA, she applied for and was accepted into a PhD program in law at a prestigious university in Wuhan.

Disha viewed the relationship between China and Bangladesh as ‘mutually beneficial’, contrasting it with what she perceives as a ‘superiority–inferiority complex’ in the US–Bangladesh relationship. She dismissed the notion of Chinese investment in South Asia as a ‘debt trap’, arguing that developing countries are not victims but active participants capable of making their own informed decisions in global affairs:

We [developing countries] are not victims, and we should not be perceived as such. I am not very appreciative of the term, because we can be smart about it, we can read contracts and make our informed decisions. Nobody put a gun to our heads and ask[ed] us to sign anything.

Rethinking China’s Soft Power

So, how do these personal reflections and attitudes help us understand China’s soft power and educational public diplomacy efforts? As global perceptions of China become increasingly polarised, particularly in the West, a different narrative emerges from the Global South.

In the West, China is frequently characterised as a threatening authoritarian power undermining the ‘international norm of democracy and the legitimacy of democracy promotion efforts’ (Hyde 2020: 1194). The US Government is obsessed with framing the US–China competition as a ‘democracy versus autocracy’ binary. Although scholars based in Western institutions have called for a more nuanced understanding of China’s global ambitions, their answers usually come down to a focus on regime-type solutions such as ‘the best way to respond to China is to make democracy work better’ (see, for instance, Chen Weiss 2019).

However, the experiences of many of the youths we interviewed suggest an alternative perspective. Rather than viewing the world through a binary lens of ideologies or regime types, these individuals are assessing various models of development. For them, the appeal of China’s state-centric development model presents a practical alternative to Western market-led approaches. They seem to view China’s foreign policy towards the Global South as ‘pragmatic and non-interventionist’, in contrast to what they perceive as the more critical and ideologically

driven narratives from the West. This perspective is further exemplified by a student from Pakistan, whom I will call Halima, who argued that South Asia should manage its own affairs independent of Western influence and welcome the presence of diverse international partners like Russia and China.

These perspectives are shaped by a mix of the students’ educational experiences in China and the realities of their home countries. While their views on development models and foreign policy often align with Chinese state narratives—partially due to how these narratives are embedded in their academic programs—our interviews revealed a more complex picture. Indoctrination alone does not fully explain their stance. Rather, students critically evaluate the Chinese State’s narrative against alternative models, drawing on their own observations of foreign involvement in their home countries. Ultimately, they arrive at their conclusions rather thoughtfully.

It is important to recognise that these views extend beyond just the young and impressionable. International relations scholar Lina Benabdallah (2020) notes in her book that China has successfully positioned itself as a peer rather than a superior power, particularly in its interactions with African states. By presenting itself as a developing country on equal footing with its African counterparts, China has made power dynamics less overt, which contributes to its success in these engagements. A Nigerian diplomat, for example, highlighted the fact that African delegations ‘were treated [as] equals, with respect and care, by their Chinese host when visiting China’ (Benabdallah 2020: 12), reinforcing this perception of equality.

In the short term, it appears that China’s narrative is gaining traction among some youths and elites in the Global South. However, as Rahman and Byler (2022) suggest, a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of Chinese soft power requires an examination of how these strategies are adapted and perceived over time within recipient countries. The long-term success of China’s educational public diplomacy in genuinely winning hearts and minds remains to be seen. ■





FOCUS

~~Chinese Journalism is Dead~~

*Long Live Chinese
Journalism!*



The Beijing News (新京报), July 2024.

Quality Journalism in China Is Not Dead; It's Just More Dispersed Than Ever

Kecheng FANG

This essay maps the evolving landscape of quality journalism in China, exploring where reliable information thrives under increasing restrictions. Analysing the roles of state-owned institutional media alongside diverse, independent voices—including professional content creators, citizen journalists, and those working transnationally—it demonstrates how these actors operate both within and beyond established media structures. The essay also discusses the challenges posed by platform dominance.

One full cycle of the Chinese zodiac has passed since the beginning of the Xi Jinping era, marking 12 years of significant transformation in the landscape of Chinese journalism. While some observers declared its demise several years ago, in this essay, I argue that despite the formidable challenges it faces, journalism in China remains remarkably resilient. It has adapted, evolved, lost some traditional strongholds, and found new life in alternative spaces. Using key events and prominent journalistic works from 2024 as examples, I will

explore the continuing vibrancy of Chinese journalism, identify its new locations, and analyse the complex challenges it confronts.

State-Owned Institutional Media: A Bulletproof Cage

In July 2024, *The Beijing News* (新京报) published a bombshell exposé revealing the unsanitary practice of cooking oil being transported in tankers previously used for industrial coal oil (Han 2024). This detailed report, which was promoted on the front page and extended to more than 5,000 words within the paper, meticulously traced a tanker from its delivery of chemical oil to its subsequent loading with cooking oil just three days later, without any intervening cleaning in the process. This revelation ignited public outrage on social media, evoking memories of the 2008 Sanlu milk scandal, which was brought to light by the now-defunct *Oriental Morning Post* (东方早报), a publication that ceased in 2017, with many of its staff transitioning to *The Paper* (澎湃新闻; see Fang and Repnikova 2022).

The publication of this investigation surprised many. *The Beijing News* was widely perceived as having lost its critical edge after its incorporation into the Beijing Municipal Propaganda Department and the imprisonment of its former publisher, Dai Zigeng (戴自更). This perception reflects a broader trend observed in the Xi era, in which the Chinese Communist Party press has been strengthened while commercial media outlets have been weakened. Scholarly works have documented this decline, noting the significant decrease in investigative reports published by outlets such as *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报), in which the number of investigative stories dropped from 169 in 2011 to just six in 2019, with the in-depth reporting page disappearing entirely in 2020 (Wang 2023: 77). Concurrently, commercial media has increasingly featured explicit and implicit propaganda promoting government achievements.

The cooking oil scandal, however, reveals the enduring potential for impactful investigative journalism within this seemingly restrictive framework. While President Xi has centralised power, the Chinese political system still requires a degree of media and

public oversight (Repnikova 2018). Investigations that focus on local issues or corporate malpractice, rather than directly challenging the central government, appear to be tolerated to a certain extent. This suggests that the space for critical reporting by state-owned institutional media, while narrowed, has not been eliminated.

The initial rumours surrounding the disappearance of Han Futao (韩福涛), the journalist who exposed the cooking oil scandal, proved to be false. His continued employment at *The Beijing News* as an investigative reporter underscores the protective function of institutional media, even as it constrains journalistic freedom. These state-owned outlets provide press credentials, facilitating access for sensitive interviews, and their official publication licences offer a degree of protection against reprisal. This ‘bulletproof cage’, as it were, offers journalists a platform for publishing investigative work, albeit within defined boundaries. Consequently, journalists seeking to pursue sensitive stories often choose to work within these institutions, accepting the limitations in exchange for the afforded protections. Other publications, such as *Caixin* (财新), *Sanlian Life Weekly* (三联生活周刊), *The Paper*, *Southern Reviews* (南风窗), and *Renwu* (人物)—all possessing official licences—similarly published notable works in 2024, demonstrating the continuing capacity for impactful journalism within this media sector.

Professional Content Creators (or *Zimeiti*): Fragile Yet Influential

The most shocking and impressive reporting in 2024 came not from a major newspaper or established magazine, but from a small independent team called *Positive Connections* (正面连接). Their 19,000-character report, ‘Stealing an 11-Year-Old Girl from Home’ (Hong 2024), focused on the tragic case of a young girl ensnared in a web of sexual exploitation and abuse. The five-month investigation revealed how the girl, isolated from family and peers, found solace in a group of similarly troubled youth—a ‘circle’ (圈子) that normalised risky behaviours, including substance abuse and sexual encounters. The story illustrates a

broader issue of child exploitation in digital spaces and raises critical questions about parental oversight, societal responsibility, and the urgent need for protective measures for at-risk youth.

Positive Connections, founded by veteran journalists from established publications such as *Southern Weekly* and *GQ China*, operates with the rigour of a professional newsroom. However, as a private company lacking the official licence for original reporting, it occupies a liminal space within the media landscape. This necessitates a strategic avoidance of overtly political topics and ‘hard news’, focusing instead on individual narratives and ‘softer’ issues. In the eyes of regulators, *Positive Connections* may be just one ‘self-media’ (自媒体 *zimeiti*) account among millions. However, for its creators, it represents a vital avenue for pursuing journalistic ideals. This delicate balance, while inherently unstable, allows the production of high-quality work that enriches the media landscape.

While the term *zimeiti* broadly encompasses content creators, both individual and institutional, lacking state-sanctioned media credentials (Fang 2022), this essay focuses on its specific application to journalists and journalistic teams leveraging social media platforms to publish their work. Before *Positive Connections*, this model of small independent teams producing impactful journalism had its precedent in figures such as Shou Ye (兽爷), a former *Southern Weekly* journalist whose team exposed safety lapses in children’s vaccines produced by Changchun Changsheng Biotechnology Company Limited in 2018 (Shou 2018). This investigation, widely circulated on social media, prompted high-level government intervention, resulting in arrests and official sanctions.

Beyond these small teams, the *zimeiti* landscape also encompasses solo creators who produce public interest journalism. For example, following *The Beijing News*’s cooking oil exposé, a Bilibili user known as ‘@高剑犁’ used publicly available data to track the implicated tanker’s movements, revealing its previous transport of not only coal oil but also animal feed (Gao 2024). This citizen-led investigation leveraged open-source intelligence and digital platforms. The creator documented the findings in a video that garnered more than 1 million views in 12 hours. It demonstrated the potential for individual creators to amplify and extend the impact of traditional media reports. Though later removed

from Bilibili, the video’s widespread republication on other platforms underscored its importance in further revealing the cooking oil scandal.

Another example is Xiang Dongliang (项栋梁), a former journalist at the Nanfang Media Group, who uses his WeChat public accounts *Constructive Opinions* (建设性意见) and *Basic Common Sense* (基本常识) to provide analysis of important public topics. Following a knife attack on a school bus carrying Japanese students in Suzhou, Xiang challenged the official narrative of it as an ‘isolated incident’, raising concerns about rising xenophobia (Xiang 2024a). His work extends beyond commentary to a form of performance art and soft activism reminiscent of civil society and internet culture in the 2000s. For instance, he once publicly ‘reported’ (举报) former *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin (胡锡进) for allegedly violating laws against using virtual private networks (VPNs) in China. In December 2024, he even rented a large advertising screen in one of the busiest Guangzhou metro stations to promote his views on traditional medicine, opposition to foreign invasions (alluding to the Russian invasion of Ukraine), and taxpayer rights (Xiang 2024b). While the advertisement was swiftly removed, Xiang’s actions highlight the potential for individual creators to challenge dominant narratives and spark public discourse.

Professional content creators who contribute to the journalistic landscape in China also include those not traditionally associated with journalism. Yixi (一席), a project hosting TED talk-style presentations, publishes in-depth discussions of critical social issues based on these speeches. For example, their talks have explored the impact of climate change on the elderly (Lu 2024) and the challenges faced by ageing migrant workers (Qiu 2023). These presentations, characterised by their sharp sense of urgency, depth, and human focus, contribute valuable perspectives to the public conversation.

In many ways, this diverse and dynamic landscape of professional content creators echoes the vibrancy of China’s commercial media in the late 1990s and 2000s. Driven by market forces and fuelled by innovation, these creators often push boundaries despite the ever-present threat of censorship and account suspension. As institutional media outlets, including commercial newspapers and magazines,

face increasing constraints, professional content creators offer new possibilities for critical reporting and public engagement.

Underground and Transnational Journalism: Brighter Sparks

While professional content creators such as *Positive Connections* navigate a precarious balance within China's digital sphere, a more clandestine network of individuals and small teams operates further underground, producing even more critical and politically sensitive content. These 'guerilla journalists' resemble the documentary filmmakers and independent writers Ian Johnson describes in his 2023 book *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and their Battle for the Future*. They carry on the legacy of publications such as *Spark*, an underground magazine produced by a group of young intellectuals, who challenged the official narrative and the top leadership during the Mao Zedong era. Johnson's work highlights the enduring struggle of memory against forgetting, and, in the current landscape, these 'sparks' of resistance burn brighter and more numerous than in the Mao era.

A stark example is the aftermath of the tragic Zhuhai car attack in November 2024, which claimed 35 lives and injured 43 people. While institutional media, including commercial outlets, constrained by censorship, offered limited coverage, citizen journalists stepped in to fill the void. The WeChat public account '图拉的精神食粮', authored by a professional journalist working independently, provided crucial firsthand accounts, including graphic descriptions of the scene and demographic details of the victims. This account, and others, such as '水瓶纪元' and '鸡蛋bot', which also published stories about the car attack based on on-site interviews and firsthand accounts, demonstrated the power of citizen journalism to circumvent official narratives and provide vital information to the public. The anonymity maintained by some of these authors, most of whom have professional backgrounds, underscores the risks inherent in such endeavours and highlights the courage and commitment required to pursue truth in a restrictive environment. It also suggests that those with profes-

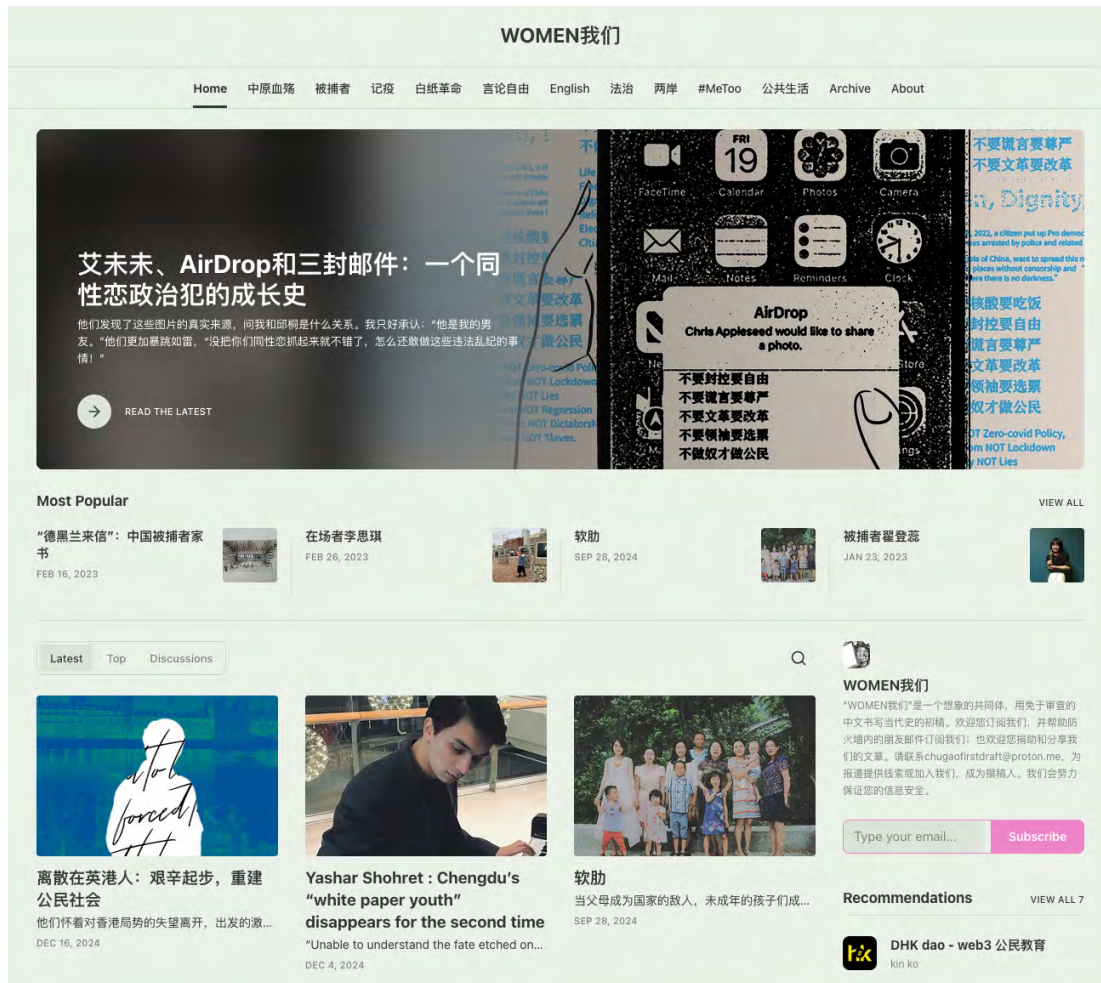
sional training are best equipped to navigate this challenging landscape, choosing to publish sensitive stories outside official channels.

This burgeoning underground journalistic activity extends beyond China's digital borders, supported by a growing network of transnational creators publishing on global platforms. The Great Translation Movement, for example, diligently translates Chinese texts into various languages, exposing events often obscured by the official narrative (Peng et al. 2024; see also Peng's critical essay in this issue). Youth-oriented Instagram accounts such as *Citizen Daily*, which was instrumental in amplifying voices during the A4 movement (Luo and Fang 2024), and Substack newsletters such as 'Women我们', which chronicles contemporary history in uncensored Chinese, further contribute to this transnational flow of information. For example, in 2024, *Women我们* featured stories on protestors arrested during Covid-zero demonstrations and the imprisoned Taiwanese publisher Fucha (富察), providing crucial context and visibility to these sensitive cases.

These diverse forms of underground and transnational journalism represent a vital counterpoint to the official narrative, offering alternative perspectives and amplifying marginalised voices. The resurgence of interest in investigative and in-depth reporting among young people, as observed by a journalism professor in mainland China with whom I recently spoke, suggests a promising future for this critical form of storytelling. Even as traditional media faces financial constraints and increasing restrictions, these aspiring journalists are finding new avenues to contribute to the public sphere, ensuring that the sparks of truth and resistance continue to ignite.

Beyond Political Pressure: The Platform Problem

While the dispersed nature of these emergent journalistic endeavours offers a degree of resilience against censorship, it also presents significant limitations. The impact of even the most compelling investigations can be blunted by the state's ability to control the narrative. The 2024 cooking oil scandal, for example, despite initial exposure by *The Beijing News* and subsequent citizen investigations, ultimately resulted



Screenshot from the Women 我们 Substack website.

in a perfunctory government report that effectively closed the case. Unlike the 2008 milk powder scandal, which spurred widespread public action and policy changes, the cooking oil incident demonstrates the diminished capacity of dispersed journalism to directly bring meaningful change in an increasingly restrictive environment.

Political pressure is not the only obstacle facing quality journalism in China. The dominance of digital platforms presents a unique set of challenges that impact all forms of journalism, from traditional news outlets to independent creators. While platforms play a significant role in information dissemination globally, their influence in China is amplified by their

absolute dominance of the information ecosystem and the lack of viable alternatives. News organisations largely reliant on platforms for distribution face several critical issues.

First, the ephemeral nature of platform-based publishing makes archiving and preserving journalistic work incredibly difficult. Articles published in social media feeds are easily lost, forgotten, or deleted, hindering efforts to maintain historical records and institutional memory. Second, platforms exert significant control over revenue models, effectively limiting news organisations to advertising-based income. Subscription models, which have proven successful in other countries, are largely unavailable in China due

to platform restrictions and the lack of independent websites or applications. This dependence on platform-controlled advertising severely constrains the financial sustainability of news organisations. Third, audience consumption habits are deeply entrenched within these platforms, making it difficult for content published outside the platform ecosystem to gain traction. Even when censored articles are reposted on alternative websites, newsletters, or global social media, they often fail to reach a wider audience within China due to the reluctance of the public to use other information channels.

This confluence of factors creates a concerning trend towards a bifurcated public sphere. A segment of the population actively seeks out quality information, using VPNs and other tools to access independent sources, while the majority remains passively reliant on platform-curated content, subject to algorithmic filtering and censorship. This growing divide poses a significant challenge for the future of journalism in China.

A State of Constant Flux

The media landscape in China is in constant flux, shaped by the interplay of tightening control, technological innovation, and the persistent pursuit of truth. While traditional media grapples with increasing constraints, a vibrant ecosystem of professional content creators, citizen journalists, and transnational reporters has emerged, offering alternative avenues for critical reporting and public engagement. Despite the challenges created by political control and platform dominance, the dedication and ingenuity of these diverse actors in China's media landscape offer a glimmer of hope. As the battle for truth continues to unfold in the digital realm, the ability of these dispersed networks to connect, collaborate, and innovate will be crucial in shaping the future of journalism in China. ■



Screenshot of the Nightly News Program *Zero Distance* (2024) on Jiangsu City Channel.

Legitimacy on Air

How Chinese Local Television News Performs Governance

Dan CHEN

This essay examines the evolution of minsheng xinwen (民生新闻, ‘news about people’s livelihood’) in China as a mechanism of controlled criticism within an authoritarian system. Through case studies such as stories of excessive parking fines and unfinished residential complexes, it illustrates how local television news resolves citizen grievances, disciplines bureaucrats, and reinforces state legitimacy. The transition from organic to orchestrated reporting in recent years highlights the diminishing autonomy of journalists and growing audience scepticism. By framing critiques as isolated incidents, minsheng xinwen balances responsiveness with systemic deflection, showcasing the adaptability of authoritarian governance while raising questions about the sustainability of controlled criticism.

In authoritarian systems, the media is often seen as a tool of propaganda, designed to suppress dissent and reinforce state control. While this perception captures a significant aspect of such regimes, it oversimplifies the dynamic ways in which the media functions in these contexts. In China, local television news, particularly the genre known as *minsheng xinwen* (民生新闻, literally, ‘news about people’s livelihood’), provides a nuanced case study. These programs highlight citizen grievances and bureaucratic failures, framing them within a narrative of governmental accountability and responsiveness.

This practice of ‘controlled criticism’ allows limited critiques of governance to flourish within carefully delineated boundaries. *Minsheng xinwen* programs use investigative reporting to expose problems such

as delayed services, poor infrastructure, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Yet, far from threatening the regime, this critical reporting reinforces its legitimacy by positioning the state as both responsive to citizen concerns and capable of delivering solutions.

This essay explores the evolution and impact of local television news in China as a mechanism of controlled criticism. By examining the development of *minsheng xinwen*, the strategic roles played by journalists, and specific cases such as parking violations and unfinished housing, it argues that local television news exemplifies the adaptive strategies that the Chinese State employs to sustain its rule.

The Evolution of *Minsheng Xinwen*

The rise of *minsheng xinwen* in the late 1990s coincided with sweeping changes in China's media landscape. As the state moved towards market-oriented reforms, local television stations faced increasing pressure to attract audiences and generate advertising revenue. To remain competitive, many stations adopted a populist approach, focusing on stories that resonated with the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

At the same time, the principle of 'supervision by public opinion' (舆论监督) was gaining traction as a governance tool (Chen 2017; Repnikova 2017a). This policy encouraged media outlets to monitor and report on local governance issues, particularly instances of corruption and inefficiency at the grass-roots level. While the central government used this policy to discipline local officials and improve governance, it also allowed media outlets to carve out a space for investigative reporting within tightly controlled boundaries.

The narrative strategies of *minsheng xinwen* are carefully calibrated to achieve two objectives: to engage audiences with relatable stories and to maintain the legitimacy of the state. A typical segment begins with a citizen grievance, such as delayed pension payments, uncollected garbage, or inadequate public facilities. The report identifies specific bureaucratic failures, often attributing them to individual officials or departments.

Crucially, systemic issues—such as insufficient funding, structural corruption, or top-down inefficiencies—are rarely addressed. Instead, the narrative frames problems as isolated incidents that can be resolved through the intervention of responsible authorities. Follow-up reports frequently highlight the resolution of these grievances, showcasing newly paved roads, repaired homes, or satisfied citizens thanking the government for its responsiveness.

One of the most illustrative examples of controlled criticism in *minsheng xinwen* is a 2017 case investigated by the program *Zero Distance* (零距离), which aired on Jiangsu Television City Channel (江苏电视城市频道) (Chen 2020: Ch. 5). It began when a forklift driver, Mr Wang, was fined 10,000 yuan for parking his vehicle on a road in Gaoxin District, Nanjing. The fine was unusually high compared with the standard penalties for such infractions in China, which typically range between 1,000 and 10,000 yuan under Article 42 of the Nanjing Urban Management Regulation.

Feeling the penalty was unjustified, Mr Wang contacted *Zero Distance* on 3 March 2017 to seek assistance. The investigation revealed troubling irregularities. The officers involved admitted that the maximum fine was issued because their superiors were inspecting the bureau on the day of the infraction. The rationale—that the fine was influenced by an officer's 'stressed mood'—outraged both Mr Wang and the journalists investigating the case.

Journalists played a crucial role in advocating for Mr Wang, who lacked the legal knowledge to challenge the fine effectively. By framing questions and arguments, they helped him articulate why the penalty was unreasonable. The story aired with these details, spotlighting the arbitrary nature of the fine and its lack of transparency.

The story took a deeper turn when Mr Wang secretly recorded a conversation with an officer, who suggested he could reduce the fine by 'looking for someone' (找人)—a euphemism for paying a bribe. Further investigation by journalists uncovered that other forklift drivers had faced similar penalties, some of which had been reduced after bribes were paid. It then emerged—revealing another layer of corruption—that the road where Mr Wang parked was not even within the jurisdiction of the Gaoxin District Government; it was privately owned by a factory.

This sequence of revelations culminated in significant outcomes. The *Zero Distance* follow-up reports prompted the city management bureau to fire the officer who had solicited bribes and conduct an internal investigation. The fines for affected forklift drivers were reduced to nominal amounts. Moreover, the local government publicly thanked *Zero Distance* for its role in supervising and exposing the issue. While this resolution demonstrated the power of media oversight, it also showcased the broader dynamics of controlled criticism.

Controlled Criticism as a Governance Tool

Controlled criticism serves as a mechanism for managing public dissatisfaction while maintaining the regime's authority. By exposing and addressing low-level bureaucratic failures, *minsheng xinwen* programs provide citizens with a sense of justice and recognition. At the same time, they deflect attention from broader systemic problems, preserving the legitimacy of higher-level authorities and the political system as a whole.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the selective framing of grievances. Issues are presented as technical or administrative errors that can be corrected through proper oversight, rather than as symptoms of deeper structural flaws. This framing reinforces the narrative of a competent and responsive government while avoiding critiques of the policies or institutions that underpin these failures.

Local leaders use controlled criticism as a tool for bureaucratic discipline. Reports exposing street-level misconduct provide a public platform for holding officials accountable, sending a clear message to other bureaucrats about the consequences of negligence or corruption.

One of the recurring issues reported by *minsheng xinwen* is the phenomenon of 'rotten-tail buildings' (烂尾楼), referring to residential projects abandoned midway through construction. This issue is widespread in China, fuelled by lax regulatory oversight, illegal financing practices, and mismanagement by developers. In 2017, the *Xi'an Zero Distance* (西安零距离) program covered a particularly striking case

involving a group of citizens who had prepaid for homes nearly a decade earlier, only to find themselves stuck with skeletal, half-built structures on the construction site (Chen 2020: Ch. 5).

The report aired on 9 April 2017 and began with an emotional account from a senior citizen, who had purchased a unit in 2008. She explained that she had hoped the apartment would allow her son, then 18, to start a family, but by the time of the report, her son was 27 and still unmarried. She attributed his misfortune to the lack of stable housing. Other residents shared similar grievances. A six-year-old girl, born after her parents purchased an unfinished unit, remarked that the home remained incomplete six years later. One young woman described borrowing large sums from family and friends to prepay for her unit, only to end up without a house and deeply in debt.

The report painted a stark picture of consumer vulnerability, juxtaposed with visuals of the abandoned high-rise skeletons. It also underscored the failures of local governance, as residents revealed that street-level officials had repeatedly promised a resolution but failed to act. However, the program avoided directly naming the government departments responsible for supervising the project. Instead, it vaguely appealed to 'relevant government bureaus' to intervene and help resolve the issue.

Although the initial report lacked resolution, the broader media supervision initiative in Xi'an enabled subsequent developments. By July 2017, the municipal government launched new radio programs and online platforms for citizen complaints, integrating them into an expanded media supervision system. This multimedia approach allowed grievances like the rotten-tail buildings case to gain more traction. In one follow-up case about a similar project, journalists referred the complaint to the Xi'an Housing Security and Management Bureau. The bureau fined the developer and tasked a lower-level bureau with further handling the issue.

These interventions once again underscored the dual function of *minsheng xinwen*. On one hand, programs like *Xi'an Zero Distance* empowered citizens by amplifying their voices and pressuring local governments to act. On the other hand, the framing of such issues as isolated incidents—blaming developers or lower-level officials—allowed the state to

deflect attention from deeper structural failures in the housing sector and make incremental but insufficient governance improvements.

Journalistic Pragmatism in *Minsheng Xinwen*

The journalists who produce *minsheng xinwen* occupy a unique position within China's media landscape. Unlike elite investigative journalists in print media, who often adopt a critical stance with a systemic focus (Hassid 2016; Repnikova 2017b), these television journalists operate as pragmatic actors, balancing state-imposed constraints with their professional identities as problem-solvers.

Pragmatic journalists in China operate within an intricate matrix of political censorship, commercial imperatives, and audience expectations. Their ability to succeed hinges on their skill in crafting narratives that resonate with viewers while carefully adhering to the boundaries set by the state. This duality—balancing professional aspirations with the realities of state control—has shaped the emergence of *minsheng xinwen* as a unique journalistic model.

The wave of media reforms in the 1990s introduced commercialisation into China's state media landscape, fundamentally altering how local television stations functioned. Previously dependent on state funding, media organisations began to rely on advertising revenue, which in turn was closely tied to viewership ratings. This transition placed immense pressure on journalists and producers to create content that attracted and retained audiences. For television news, the rise of *minsheng xinwen* was a direct response to these pressures.

Critical reporting became a profitable venture. Programs like *Zero Distance* on Jiangsu Television Station, *1818 Gold Eye* (1818黄金眼) on Zhejiang Television Station, and *On the Spot* (DV现场) on Guangdong Television Station demonstrated that investigative pieces addressing local grievances could captivate audiences, driving up ratings and generating significant advertising revenue. For example, in the early 2000s, *Zero Distance* achieved average ratings of 9.2 per cent, with advertising revenue surpassing 13

million yuan annually—a remarkable feat that showcased the commercial potential of critical reporting (Chen 2020).

Beyond commercial pressures, journalists in this space developed a strong professional identity centred on advocacy. They viewed themselves as champions of ordinary citizens, leveraging their media platforms to amplify public grievances and demand redress. This advocacy-oriented identity was shaped by the populist mission of *minsheng xinwen*: to be 'close to reality, close to livelihood, and close to the people' (贴近实际、贴近生活、贴近群众) (Zhang and Wang 2012).

Original survey data from my first book, *Convenient Criticism: Local Media and Governance in Urban China* (2020), revealed that on the question of ideal journalistic role, 28.1 per cent of television journalists at a municipal television station in northeastern China considered themselves 'bridges between the government and the public', 19.8 per cent described their mission as using media power to help citizens solve problems, and 32.3 per cent thought helping people understand issues and acquire information was their most important role. This populist orientation was reflected in their content, with citizen disputes and grievances consistently ranking among the most covered topics.

Political constraints remain a defining feature of the journalistic environment in China. Journalists must operate within tightly controlled boundaries, avoiding topics that could undermine the regime's legitimacy or implicate higher authorities. Instead, their work focuses on street-level bureaucratic failures, which are framed as isolated incidents that can be swiftly addressed.

For example, in the forklift driver case, journalists on *Zero Distance* used strategic framing to expose corruption within the city management bureau without critiquing the broader regulatory system. This approach ensured the story remained palatable to authorities while delivering tangible outcomes for the aggrieved drivers.

Survey data underscore the prevalence of political intervention in this space. In the same original survey, 31.3 per cent of journalists reported experiencing frequent government interference in their critical reporting. Despite these challenges, they

leveraged creative strategies to expand the boundaries of permissible discourse, often using social media trends or public opinion as justification for their reporting choices.

The dynamic interplay between journalists and local officials further complicates this landscape. While journalists aim to advocate for citizens, local leaders often coopt critical reporting to advance their governance agendas. For instance, by allowing or orchestrating critical reports, leaders can discipline street-level bureaucrats, address public grievances, and bolster their reputation for effective governance.

This symbiotic relationship highlights the dual utility of *minsheng xinwen*. On one hand, it provides journalists with the professional satisfaction of addressing social issues. On the other, it serves as a governance tool for local leaders, enabling them to showcase their responsiveness and commitment to public welfare without challenging systemic problems.

Despite these constraints, journalists have carved out a precarious but impactful role within China's media ecosystem. Their work often results in tangible outcomes, such as fines for corrupt officials or reforms to problematic policies. At the same time, their dependence on state approval underscores the fragility of their position.

In this context, the success of *minsheng xinwen* lies in its ability to 'secure both ends of the bridge': addressing citizen grievances while aligning with state priorities. By so doing, these programs have established themselves as indispensable players in local governance, navigating the tension between advocacy and compliance.

The Shift from Organic to Orchestrated Reporting

In the early years of *minsheng xinwen*, many reports arose organically, driven by journalists who independently identified compelling stories through citizen complaints, hotline calls, or grassroots investigations. These organically initiated stories often reflected the agency of journalists within the constraints of state control. However, as political

oversight tightened under President Xi Jinping's leadership, this space for spontaneity has steadily diminished.

The centralisation of power under Xi has amplified the rigidity of media control. Local leaders increasingly see orchestrated reporting—where government officials actively direct media coverage—as a safer and more effective strategy. Orchestrated critical reporting ensures that topics align closely with governance priorities and sidestep politically sensitive or systemic issues. For instance, officials often use orchestrated criticism to highlight governance successes or address minor bureaucratic infractions, presenting the government as both capable and responsive. By shifting from organic to orchestrated reporting, the autonomy of journalists has been curtailed, effectively coopting their professional aspirations into serving state objectives.

The shift towards orchestrated reporting carries significant implications for the credibility of local television news. Early iterations of *minsheng xinwen* enjoyed widespread public trust, as their investigative tone and tangible outcomes made them appear authentic advocates for citizen concerns. Over time, however, the increasingly performative nature of orchestrated reports has eroded this trust.

Audience scepticism has grown as citizens recognise the formulaic structure of orchestrated reports, which often highlight minor grievances while deflecting attention from broader systemic problems. This loss of credibility poses a challenge for the regime, as the effectiveness of controlled criticism relies on its perceived authenticity. A report that appears overly staged or overly protective of higher authorities risks alienating the public it seeks to placate.

Controlled criticism in *minsheng xinwen* exemplifies the adaptability of China's authoritarian regime in leveraging the media for governance. The model of controlled criticism has evolved as a tool to maintain 'performance legitimacy'—a concept highlighting the regime's need to demonstrate its effectiveness in addressing public grievances (Nathan 2009). The theory of 'convenient criticism' advanced in my book underscores this dynamic: criticism is allowed and even encouraged when it aligns with governance goals, such as disciplining bureaucrats or addressing

localised complaints, but it remains tightly bounded to avoid challenging the regime's foundational legitimacy.

This adaptability reflects broader trends in authoritarian media politics. Scholars like Maria Repnikova (2017b) and Rongbin Han (2018) have shown how state-media relationships in authoritarian regimes can shift from outright suppression to strategic co-optation. By allowing limited criticism, regimes like China's not only mitigate citizen dissatisfaction but also coopt media professionals into serving the state's broader goals. This dynamic contrasts with older models of authoritarian media control that relied primarily on censorship and propaganda, highlighting the increasing sophistication of authoritarian strategies.

While controlled critical reporting offers short-term gains in bureaucratic discipline and public satisfaction, its long-term effectiveness is uncertain. The reliance on superficial resolutions and performative governance creates a fragile foundation for sustained legitimacy. Without addressing the underlying systemic issues that drive citizen grievances, the regime risks fostering deeper public cynicism. Furthermore, the declining autonomy of journalists reduces the diversity and depth of media coverage, undermining the very mechanism that once strengthened governance at the local level.

These limitations highlight the precarious balance authoritarian regimes must maintain in using the media as a governance tool. While controlled criticism can be a potent mechanism for reinforcing state authority, its utility diminishes as public trust erodes. As China continues to centralise control over its media landscape, the question remains: can controlled critical reporting adapt to the challenges of an increasingly sceptical public in an age of rapid social and technological change? ■



Alone on stage, Source: [Pxhere.com](https://pxhere.com) (CC).

Digital Hope or Digital Trap?

Understanding China's
Waixuan Jizhe (Foreign-Aimed
Journalists) in the Internet Age

Tucker WANG-HAI

While the Chinese Government bans most popular foreign social media services, it does not underestimate the strategic role of these networked technologies, particularly their potential to strengthen China's communication with the world. In recent years, leveraging foreign social media platforms has become a common practice in the foreign-aimed reporting sector in China. This essay explores how Chinese foreign-aimed journalists—individuals who are expected to use and normalise foreign platforms at work—navigate a changing work environment as their journalistic practices and traditional routines are increasingly platform-based and digitally oriented.

In a 2022 article in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) journal *Qiushi* (求是), Shen Haixiong, president of the China Media Group (CMG), a state-owned entity formed in 2018 consolidating CCTV, China National Radio, and China Radio International, took an unusual step. In highlighting the global reach of CMG's coverage of the Twentieth National Congress of the CCP, he cited detailed engagement metrics from foreign social media platforms to demonstrate the success and international influence of CMG. Quoting data indicating that CMG's content 'reached a total of 25.2 billion global views across diverse platforms', Shen's data-centred rhetoric marked a significant departure from previous

leadership discourse on media impact. For instance, when summarising the coverage of the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP in 2017, media leaders only briefly mentioned social media metrics, and even these were limited to domestic platforms like Weibo (see Pan 2017). This shift towards citing foreign platform engagement data underscores the growing emphasis Chinese media places on their performance across global digital platforms.

In China's party-led media system, the priorities emphasised or advocated by media leadership usually dictate the focus of on-the-ground journalists in their reporting tasks (Tsai 2017). Shen's article thus serves as a vivid example illustrating how China's foreign-aimed reporting *duiwai baodao* (对外报道) has become increasingly reliant on popular social media such as Facebook and Twitter (now X), despite China neither owning these platforms nor allowing access to them within its borders. Compared with traditional foreign reporting channels such as foreign publishing (对外出版) and transnational broadcasting (对外广播), the emergence and popularity of foreign platforms, particularly successful US-owned ones, present a near-perfect complementary strategy: they boast large user communities, incur minimal distribution costs, and provide virtually global reach. While scholars have generally concluded that China is becoming more strategic and digitally driven in its approach to global media influence (Kurlantzick 2022; Molter and DiResta 2020), their focus has primarily centred on the causal relationship between leadership directives and media outlet actions. For instance, it is common for scholars to cite Chinese President Xi Jinping's speeches on enhancing international communication competence in the digital age and to note the consequent proliferation of China-backed accounts across various platforms (Cook 2020). However, less attention has been focused on the impact of digital transformation on the work of foreign-aimed journalists. Does this digital shift simplify or complicate the work of China's foreign-aimed reporting?

This essay explores the inner workings of Chinese foreign-aimed journalists (外宣记者) engaged in digital news production, revealing the tensions and challenges these professionals face in navigating a transnational and digital landscape. The facts and data presented in this article are primarily drawn from my fieldwork conducted in Beijing in 2021,

supplemented by follow-up interviews, encounters, and additional fieldwork focusing on China's foreign-aimed journalists. The follow-up data collection has been carried out in both China and Thailand.

Inside the Digital Shift in China's Foreign-Aimed Reporting

Behind the increasing visibility of Chinese media on foreign social media platforms lies a systemic reform that has been rapidly pushing digital shifts among Chinese news outlets over the past decade. Foremost among these changes is the structural change pioneered by the *People's Daily* (人民日报) when the flagship outlet launched its All-Media News Production Platform (全媒体新闻平台) in 2015. More commonly known by its nickname, Central Kitchen (中央厨房), this mechanism refers to an internal system in which news content is centrally produced or gathered and made available to journalists and editors from various departments for adaptation across multiple formats and platforms—analogous to a central kitchen providing ingredients for different cooking methods (New Media 2018).

Following the lead of the *People's Daily*, media organisations across China began establishing their own central kitchens, accelerating digital transformation in both domestic and foreign-aimed reporting. However, this mechanism appears to be more crucial for the latter sector, given the challenges and competition Chinese media faces on the global stage. By offering readily accessible information and news material, a central kitchen can facilitate timely multi-lingual and multi-format delivery to global audiences, potentially enhancing Chinese media's competitiveness in the international news arena (Shi and Zhang 2018).

Of course, no single mechanism could suffice. Along with the central kitchens came other changes. In terms of talent recruitment, major outlets have begun to secure digitally savvy young graduates to fill emerging positions such as 'social media journalist'. As well as individuals with media writing or basic foreign language skills, media outlets today tend to favour those proficient in video editing or graphic design. Financially, the Chinese Government has

significantly increased funding to support digital initiatives, such as short documentaries and well-designed infographics. Most outlets have received government funding to support equipment purchases, post-production design, and even overseas advertising and marketing. Moreover, synchronised content distribution has become commonplace, with certain content published across various publisher and journalist accounts. Notable examples include the widespread sharing of *The Song of Shi San Wu* (十三之歌), an animated music video with American-accented performers gleefully singing and chitchatting about China's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan, or the livestreaming of the construction of Wuhan's Huoshenshan and Leishenshan hospitals.

Even communication within the CCP's propaganda system has become increasingly metrics centred. Since about 2018, data on content performance on foreign social media became central to internal communications within China's propaganda system. A bottom-up summary-and-report mechanism emerged, connecting frontline journalists, editorial offices, media executives, and top officials in the Central Propaganda Department (中宣部), which oversees China's propaganda work (Wang 2023). This mechanism primarily tracks the 'performance' across foreign social media of foreign-aimed reporting on national leaders and major events. While these metrics rarely impact journalists' pay directly, reviewing social media data—including reach, clicks, views, and comments—has become routine for both ground-level staff and media leadership. These changes suggest that the metrics of foreign social media have brought a new sense of optimism to Chinese media organisations. There is a growing belief that these quantifiable indicators represent the true international influence of Chinese media.

But do the journalists themselves share this optimistic view? And what does the digital transformation mean to their everyday newsmaking work?

Everything Can Perform Well Digitally, No?

What directly accompanies the normalisation of platform-centred news production, however, are the heightened expectations from the Central Propaganda

Department. The success of one story, as measured by visible metrics, creates an expectation that other China-related stories can achieve a similar reception on social media. Driven by this perspective, the Propaganda Department has, in effect, placed an even heavier burden on journalists. Their simple yet challenging hope is that content aligning with the CCP's propaganda agenda will not only go digital but also achieve significant success—measured in terms of metrics. It is then the foreign-aimed journalists who face unprecedented pressure in the production process.

Paradoxically, Chinese journalists initially viewed digital-oriented work quite differently: most hoped for less intensive control and censorship in digital news production. Young journalist Chen Li (a pseudonym, as are all other journalists' names in this essay) exemplified this initial optimism. When first assigned to a social media team focused on YouTube and Facebook content production, she viewed this work as a promising 'free zone' within China's media system. Chen initially believed that the freedom and audience-centred culture of foreign social media platforms would encourage Chinese journalists to produce content more aligned with reader preferences and less constrained by CCP directives. While her team initially enjoyed relative freedom when they launched a publisher page on YouTube, the page was soon flooded with content they were instructed or advised to post. This is what journalists like Chen usually call 'compulsory work' (规定动作).

However, this CCP-favoured 'compulsory work' is often at odds with what platforms prioritise. Unlike the traditional one-to-many model preferred and utilised by the Chinese media system, most social platforms today are designed to encourage a many-to-many interaction. Content creators, be they publishers or influencers, who fail to understand or adapt to this model often struggle to generate traffic on these platforms—an issue that seems to trouble many Chinese journalists working in platform-based newsmaking (Wang-Hai 2024).

Li Xinyi, whose team focused on reaching a South-east Asian audience, once collaborated with a China-based Filipino influencer to make a video. Noticing that the same content performed significantly better on the influencer's personal page, Li was prompted to conduct a comparative analysis. Both her team and the influencer shared China-related news and

lifestyle content on Facebook, yet the latter consistently achieved higher engagement, even though Li's team's videos were typically more professionally produced. Li believes the real reason for the difference in performance lies not in production quality but in how the two pages engage with their audiences. 'He [the influencer] has been trying to "share" with his followers, whereas we have always been trying to "impose" ideas,' Li concluded.

Li's conclusion, in fact, applies to most pages and accounts managed by Chinese media. What is usually being imposed are the key events on the CCP's agenda. China's Two Sessions, for example, are the object of extensive mandatory coverage each year across various platforms and in multiple foreign languages, despite a shared recognition that foreign audiences have limited interest. Journalists must not only publish content related to the Two Sessions but also regularly report on its performance. As a direct consequence of this forced reporting agenda, platforms experience a loss of followers and declining engagement when they are flooded by political content. Journalists must then spend extra time and energy to recover their following, attempting to win back followers lost due to the overly propagandistic style imposed on them. Some try to constantly experiment with new genres or formats to report on the CCP agenda, while others attempt to intersperse the political coverage with softer, more interesting news. Regardless, these additional attempts and efforts are often invisible work, which is generally ignored or underestimated.

From Telling China Stories to Selling China Stories

Another significant change in recent years is how foreign-aimed journalists have developed a more multifaceted understanding of their role. They have evolved from traditional storytellers to content marketers and brand managers—a shift that has largely been driven by the advent of social media platforms and their quantifiable metrics. Before the dawn of social media, foreign-aimed reporting in China was mostly publishing and broadcasting-focused, and journalists' role was to tell China's story in as palatable a way as possible (Brady 2018). Now,

however, new platforms have made content evaluation much more quantifiable. This has prompted a business turn in the newsroom: journalists must know not only how to write a story well, but also how to sell it effectively. Consequently, the journalist's role is increasingly resembling that of a product manager: they must manage the pages or accounts of their publication as though it were a brand (see Petre 2021).

In Chinese newsrooms, the normalisation of foreign platforms has led to the infiltration of commercial thinking, bringing about revolutionary changes in how journalists perform their role. First, more and more journalists have started to learn how to engage in commercial hustling, as exemplified by the adoption of social media ads and paid boosting options provided by social media companies. Facebook and YouTube ads—a function initially designed for digital businesses—have been leveraged by Chinese journalists as a shortcut to promote content to a wider readership. Moreover, journalists have begun to conduct audience analysis to provide better targeted content. The age, language, location, gender, interests, and even time zones of social media users have become common considerations before posting content. Additionally, journalists are now savvy about stretching their advertising money on social media. For example, when they want to reach English speakers, most have acknowledged that 'it's cheaper to advertise to people in India than in the United States'. Most notably, journalists have largely learned how to do this by themselves, as most senior employees at the media management level are not social media savvy and, therefore, cannot provide systematic guidance.

Second, journalists have also started to expand their outreach work by cooperating with non-media actors such as provincial or local-level publicity offices (地方外宣) and communication departments of state-owned companies (企业外宣). These collaborations are encouraged by the CCP, which has been demanding the strengthening of foreign propaganda efforts by these two types of bodies (Lyhne-Gold 2024; Zhi 2019; Yi 2024). Many newsrooms have now established business partnerships with local governments and state-owned companies, offering their content production teams and space on their relatively established pages on foreign media platforms to post content for these 'clients'. During my fieldwork in Beijing in 2021, it was not uncommon to see young journalists taking on managerial roles

overseeing outreach work with clients. For instance, Liu Yong transitioned from being an English-language reporter to a social media manager in just a few years. He quickly moved into a role developing business partnerships and collaborations with local governments interested in working with his newsroom's content team. After selection and negotiation, Liu takes orders from these clients and produces content (such as social media-friendly videos) to post on their social media portals. Usually, this content aims to promote the image of a Chinese city or province. Additionally, state-owned companies often seek to work with these professionals to manage their Facebook pages or company websites as they expand globally and recognise the need to brand themselves through social media.

Last, journalists have taken on additional roles on an irregular or semi-regular basis. These include collaborating with advertising agents to enhance content performance, working with information technology providers to navigate internet issues and access foreign media by bypassing China's Great Firewall, and negotiating content-sharing agreements with foreign social media influencers or media outlets. What these ad hoc responsibilities have in common is that they place journalists on the front lines of managing digital content production mechanisms, often with limited support from their employer. Consequently, these individual journalists find themselves solving problems and shouldering more responsibilities than their traditional roles would typically entail.

Platforms with Foreign Genes

The rapid and government-propelled digital transformation reveals the CCP's confidence in emerging platforms as amplifiers of media influence. This optimism, however, noticeably contrasts with the experiences of journalists: those involved in daily newsmaking and distribution are identifying significant issues with relying on foreign platforms, even though they are a shortcut to accessing a broader readership. While media worldwide has also faced challenges adapting to a new normal of social media-centred transformation (Cohen 2019; Meese and Hurcombe 2021), the Chinese experiences differ notably from those of their

Western media counterparts. The core reason for this discrepancy lies in China's longstanding wariness of Western internet infrastructure. Since the 2010 China Google drama, when Google withdrew from mainland China over internet censorship, the Chinese Government has been advancing its ideology that cyberspace is an extension of national territory and should be thoroughly governed by the state (Yeo 2016). As a result, the CCP has been overseeing all content flows while excluding all foreign websites that do not align with local internet laws. This approach has led to the development of a unique and relatively isolated Chinese internet ecosystem, distinct from the global online landscape.

This digital isolation extends to social media as well. After two decades of evolution in relative isolation, both ordinary users and media professionals in China have developed a distinct digital savvy tailored to Chinese social media. This ecosystem is marked by state-controlled internet firms rather than fully for-profit entities, pervasive content censorship, and special privileges for state media journalists. For example, Chinese netizens have come up with the Martian language (火星文) or other homophonic puns (谐音梗) as grassroots methods to swiftly and smartly bypass internet censorship. However, official media accounts enjoy exemptions from strict censorship, allowing direct posting without tricky workarounds. This significantly streamlines work for the journalists managing these accounts.

Yet, on Silicon Valley platforms, neither the omnipresent censorship nor the media privileges are applicable. This new environment presents a double-edged sword: on one hand, journalists have more freedom in deciding what content to post without the constraints of censorship; on the other, unlike on domestic platforms, they no longer enjoy the special status afforded to official Chinese media. The recommendation algorithms now treat content from Chinese media outlets the same way they treat posts from any other user. Many journalists have expressed how the algorithmic landscapes of Facebook and Twitter challenge their professional identity as supposedly more trustworthy information providers. Increasingly, Chinese journalists find themselves prioritising content's performance over its inherent newsworthiness, shifting their focus from 'what to post' to 'what would make a post popular' (Wang-Hai 2024).

This, however, is not the worst of it. Evidence suggests that platforms have begun paying special attention to accounts potentially associated with the Chinese Government. Companies like Meta have started scrutinising what they term ‘operations’—government-backed campaigns believed to disrupt the platform’s information landscape. These operations are seen as potentially damaging, capable of heightening partisan tensions in democratic societies such as the United States. China-backed online activities have become a major focus of these efforts (Bond 2023).

The story is a bit different for journalists. From the Chinese journalists’ perspective, US-owned platforms are increasingly ‘disrupting their work’. Many operate as page or account editors for outlets now tagged as ‘government-sponsored media’. During my fieldwork in recent years, Chinese journalists have frequently expressed frustration with foreign platforms, citing experiences such as noticeable traffic limitations even on non-political content, sudden editor account suspensions, and freezing of advertising functions from time to time. While no definitive explanation for these unusual experiences has emerged, a sentiment widely shared among Chinese journalists is that foreign platforms are hostile to their work. Many view these actions as an extension of US–China tensions, with US companies specifically targeting Chinese media.

struggle to balance journalistic autonomy with the constraints of a highly controlled professional environment.

Much like China’s media marketisation trend of decades past, the emergence of new technologies has not precipitated a fundamental transformation of journalists’ daily priorities in China, nor has it led to an approach that mirrors that seen in other national contexts where these technologies are employed. The case of China’s foreign-aimed journalists highlights the slow evolution of the journalism profession in China. While there has been a measured rise in originality and autonomy among journalists, it has not fundamentally diminished the CCP’s absolute control over the news media. These dynamics merit further attention in the study of journalistic practice in the digital age. ■

Concluding Thoughts

Current discussions of China’s foreign-aimed journalists often revolve around how they operate within China’s propaganda machinery or are inferred from the content they publish (Brady 2018). However, this oversimplified portrayal can be enriched by examining the inner workings of their newsrooms. Whether in digital form or not, news is the result of a complex production process that involves extensive negotiation and compromise. The rapid adoption of emerging platforms, including US-owned ones, reflects the Chinese Government’s recognition of the potential of digital and networked distribution. From the Chinese journalists’ perspective, however, this digital shift is not merely a technological transition. It also represents a new chapter in their ongoing



Woman. Source: Canvas Blank (CC), [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/canvasblank/).

News Media and the Feminist Movement in China

A Brief History

LI Jun

This essay presents a historical analysis of the evolving relationship between Chinese news media and the feminist movement over the past three decades. It investigates how Chinese feminists have strategically utilised media platforms to advance their causes and examines the influence of media system transformations on the paradigms of feminist activism. The article argues that young women, empowered and inspired by feminist activism, have emerged as a critical force in sustaining the resilience of journalism.

In 2005, the commentary section of *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报), then one of China's most prominent liberal newspapers, published a column criticising the anti-sexual harassment legislation introduced as part of amendments to the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests as unnecessary (Da Shi 2005). About the same time, the paper ran a commentary asserting that the practice of higher admission thresholds for female students at Peking University was 'not gender discrimination' (Yan 2005). That same year, a global feminist initiative to nominate '1,000 Women for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize' was framed by some market-oriented Chinese media outlets as a 'suspected scam' (Shen 2005).

Twenty years ago, few journalists or readers could have anticipated the seismic shifts in Chinese journalism we see today. The once-dominant high-profile male journalists and opinion leaders have largely faded from the scene, while women now make up more than half of the journalistic workforce in China. Reporting on gender-based violence has become mainstream, and young women have emerged as the benchmark for journalism's public role measured in terms of serving both 'the public interest' and 'the interest of the public'. Meanwhile, media outlets frequently find themselves at the centre of public controversies over their stance on gender equality and women's rights. The evolving relationship between feminism and the media stems not only from generational differences in feminist movements and their interactions with the state, but also from the profound influence of feminist movements on audiences and the journalistic community.

An Earlier Generation of Feminist Activists

In 2004, I co-founded a journalist group in Guangzhou that aimed to challenge the blind spots or even hostile attitudes of the journalist community towards women's rights issues and to enhance the visibility of gender-related topics. This initiative emerged as a follow-up to the 'Media and Gender' workshop organised by Sun Yat-sen University Professor Ai Xiaoming in collaboration with the British Council.

From that point, my colleagues and I took on the work of transforming the media and journalist communities, eventually developing this group into a feminist nongovernmental organisation (NGO) called Women Awakening Network (WAN, 新媒体女性网络, also known as New Media Women Network). The organisation operated until 2022, when it was forced to close under police pressure. What compelled me to act—beyond the inspiration of Ai Xiaoming's call to our generation of Guangzhou feminists, who grew up in the reform era—was the state of the Chinese press at the time: a market-oriented liberal media that supported civil rights and social movements in the country but nevertheless often adopted a reactionary stance towards the feminist movement.

China's market-oriented liberal media has historically been closely connected with social movements. Buoyed by coverage of landmark events such as the 2003 Sun Zhigang incident, in which a migrant worker died in detention due to police brutality (Froissart 2022), and the Nu River hydropower controversy (Magee and McDonald 2006), liberal-leaning commercial outlets emerged as a critical infrastructure for social movements in China. Journalists actively engaged with rights-based social movements, playing a key role in facilitating public scrutiny of policy decisions and contributing to the process of deliberating on public policies (Lin and Zhao 2008; Zeng and Huang 2013, 2015).

However, the examples at the beginning of this essay reveal that the reformist vision of market-driven media failed to incorporate women's rights and gender equality. This exclusion stems mainly from the neoliberal tendencies inherent in much of Chinese liberalism, which dismiss gender equality as part of a failed communist agenda. Beyond the hostility or indifference towards feminism among the public intellectuals involved in market-driven media (Li 2021: 157), this dynamic was also shaped by the activism model of an earlier generation of women's NGOs, most of which were founded in the 1980s and then flourished in the wake of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. Noted in the West as where then-US First Lady Hillary Clinton proclaimed 'women's rights are human rights', the conference is generally regarded as a watershed moment for the resurgence of Chinese civil society after the frosty years that followed the 1989 crackdown.

I frame this type of activism model through the lens of transactional activism (Petrova and Tarrow 2007; Li and Li 2017). Operating under the constraints of an authoritarian government, these NGOs often rely on their members' insider positions within government institutions for political cover and to push for policy change. In so doing, they consciously 'depoliticise' their efforts, forgoing public mobilisation to engage with policymakers or government entities—typically local governments or the Women's Federation—as subject-area experts. Their approach centres on problem-solving social actions, with decision-makers as their primary targets of mobilisation. This strategy also explains why women's NGOs in China had been

able to operate within a relatively safe zone until 2015, when a group of young activists known as the ‘Feminist Five’ were arrested.

Established women’s NGOs tend to collaborate with official media, which is affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party or government agencies, and believe such partnerships are safer and more conducive to their work. However, this approach poses significant constraints. To motivate officials to support them and their causes, these NGOs expect the media to provide favourable coverage of the effectiveness of their projects and the support provided by the authorities; they also prefer journalists to avoid controversial topics and negative news and focus instead on government achievements and policy promotion.

To secure government cooperation and maintain their roles as advisors and experts within the system, these feminist activists often remain behind the scenes when publicising their achievements, downplaying their contribution. This is in line with the government’s own communication preferences, which favour ‘positive reporting’. This entails attributing project successes to the correct decisions of relevant leaders, avoiding any information that could disrupt relationships between collaborating government departments or threaten social stability—such as exposing serious societal problems.

While these demands often conflict with the objectives of market-driven media, which favours newsworthy and attention-grabbing stories, they align with the priorities of state-affiliated media. These priorities include eliciting directives from leaders, creating top-down pressure or motivation within the system rather than relying on public scrutiny, securing legal and policy changes, and scaling experimental projects to broader implementation (Li 2014). To achieve these aims, these NGOs also often avoid using explicitly feminist language altogether. Taken together, these factors make it difficult for the work and ideas of these groups to reach a broader audience, such as the one to which market-driven media caters.

Guangzhou Feminism

While this older generation of feminist activists primarily operates in Beijing and northern provincial

capitals, starting in the early 2000s, they were matched by a new generation of feminist activists most of whom were based on the southern coast, especially in Guangzhou. It is not a coincidence that this is where the most successful market-oriented media outlets were once concentrated.

During the ‘golden age’ of Chinese newspapers from the early 2000s until Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2013, Guangzhou’s two leading market-driven dailies, *Southern Metropolis Daily* (南方都市报) and *Guangzhou Daily* (广州日报), dominated the profitability rankings for evening and metropolitan papers nationwide. Intense competition between these outlets and the city’s relatively open local political climate fostered a strong tradition of ‘supervision by public opinion’ (舆论监督). This ethos, particularly after the high-profile Sun Zhigang case in 2003, helped establish watchdog journalism as a defining feature of the national media landscape. In this environment, a new model of feminist activism began to emerge.

In 2003, the Gender Education Forum was established at Guangzhou’s Sun Yat-sen University under the leadership of Ai Xiaoming. It launched its namesake website, which featured sections such as ‘Women’s Rights Advocacy’ (妇女维权行动) and ‘Southern Media Watch’ (南方媒体观察). A year later, WAN was founded as part of a broader feminist agenda to reshape southern media through a feminist lens (Zheng 2018; Wang 2018).

Although both the generation shaped by the 1995 World Conference on Women and Guangzhou’s feminist community have included feminist critiques of the media in their activism, there is a key difference: Guangzhou’s feminist network has been deeply intertwined with market-driven, liberal media circles since its inception. Unlike the World Conference generation, Guangzhou feminists were not affiliated with the Women’s Federation nor initially positioned as ‘experts on women’s work’ within the government. Their efforts were not aimed at advising the state but rather at shaping public opinion and influencing the media directly.

Ai Xiaoming pioneered the Guangzhou feminist community’s distinctive approach of actively engaging with public concerns through the media. By employing diverse mediums such as theatre, documentaries, journalism, lectures, and exhibitions to address gender issues, the community became a vital

force in creating feminist space and producing public knowledge within Guangzhou's dynamic civil society. This active knowledge production is a defining characteristic of the city's feminist movement.

Among the most notable examples of this type of engagement were interventions in cases like the Huang Jing date-rape case; the Taishi Village (太石村) incident, in which residents of a suburban village in Guangzhou attempted to remove corrupt village committee officials, leading to a government crackdown; the HIV/AIDS crisis caused by the blood trade in Henan Province; and advocacy for victims of unsafe cosmetic implants as well as workplace and campus sexual harassment. Guangzhou feminists consistently sought to leverage public spaces and collaborated closely with the media during critical public incidents, using these opportunities to advocate for feminist demands and intervene in individual cases.

During Guangzhou's International Women's Day Centennial Commemoration events in 2010, one standout initiative was a flash mob at a metro station where students protested cosmetic surgery advertisements promoting unhealthy beauty standards and unsafe medical procedures (New Express 2010). This action garnered extensive positive coverage from local newspapers, highlighting the potential of the market-oriented media environment to support feminist advocacy. The success later inspired the organisers of the 'Young Feminist Action' training camps, at which Guangzhou organisers were invited to share their experiences and strategies with emerging feminist action groups.

Feminists in Guangzhou established a feminist public sphere rooted in physical spaces and the media environment. Local media became increasingly familiar with and supportive of feminist ideas, and it was common practice for Guangzhou's media outlets to report on local governance and policy deliberations. Coupled with relatively relaxed social controls at the time, these factors made Guangzhou the ideal starting point for a series of high-profile campaigns in the early 2010s.

The Media's Darling

In 2012, a younger generation of feminist activists born in the 1990s entered the media spotlight under

the banners of 'youth participation' (青年参与) and 'public welfare action' (公益行动). From the 'Occupy Men's Restrooms' campaign, which called for changes in public restroom planning to address the insufficient spaces for women, to the shaved-head protest against the Ministry of Education over male students being admitted to universities with lower scores than female counterparts, these actions enjoyed substantial media support and positive coverage, even garnering public service awards from the media. This favourable coverage was partly rooted in the Guangdong media's longstanding openness to youth and civic accountability campaigns, which had gained momentum after 2008 around issues such as hepatitis-B discrimination, cultural preservation, and public budget transparency.

It was in Guangzhou that young feminist activists received the most positive official responses to their initiatives. The city's media outlets amplified their efforts and created a ripple effect, inspiring coverage in outlets beyond the province. This regional support became crucial in sustaining the visibility and influence of young feminists' actions.

The supportive coverage from market-driven media can largely be attributed to the strategic differences between younger feminist activists and the earlier generation of activists who had emerged from the World Conference on Women. The younger activists relied heavily on 'news-making' as a mobilisation tactic—using performance art, strategic litigation, and public information requests to turn gender discrimination issues into media-worthy 'events'. This approach secured coverage and brought public attention to discriminatory policies and laws, pressuring the state to respond.

The image of the 'female college student' aligns well with the commercial interests of the media, making it a group that journalists are eager to cover. Young feminist activists primarily focused on issues such as gender discrimination in urban planning, the workplace, and university admissions—topics that largely fitted within the market-oriented media's typical framework of moderate accountability. The media supported issues of equal rights that were already affirmed by existing policies and legal frameworks but remained poorly implemented. The government agencies being held accountable were often the relatively weaker ones, such as the Departments of Education, Urban Management, and Human Resources and Social Security.

One notable exception occurred in 2014, when a young woman sued the Guangdong Provincial Public Security Department (Cheng 2021). She claimed that the department had violated the law when responding to her request for information disclosure about custody and education-related issues. She also sought a legal order mandating that the department disclose the requested information. Despite the sensitivities involved in taking on a powerful government agency, this case still received media attention beyond Guangdong. Additionally, the feminist activists' willingness to 'show up' as stakeholders and share their motives and personal stories aligned well with the media's storytelling needs.

The high point of this wave of youth-led accountability activism came during the 2013 National People's Congress. Ten female students from the law schools of eight universities across China sent letters to more than 200 delegates and members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, urging action against gender discrimination in college admissions (Wu et al. 2013). Then education minister Yuan Guiren's response acknowledging the existence of restrictions on female students in special majors and promising that some of these restrictions would be removed in the following year sparked a flurry of media coverage, amplifying their call for change (Wu et al. 2013).

Young feminist activism capitalised on the final glow of market-driven media in China. About 2012, mounting financial pressures began to strain the newspaper industry (Guo 2013). The honeymoon between mainstream commercial media and feminist movements lasted only two to three years. The 2013 'New Year Editorial Incident' at *Southern Weekly* (南方周末), in which members of the newsroom protested against the Guangdong Provincial Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party for altering their New Year editorial, ultimately sparking nationwide online solidarity, marked the beginning of an era of extreme tightening of press freedom and strict control of public opinion. The liberal Southern Press Group newsroom was placed under the control of propaganda officials, prompting a mass exodus of seasoned reporters from traditional newsrooms. By 2014, Guangdong's propaganda authorities had banned coverage of feminist street actions and the national security services had blacklisted some

influential feminists. In 2016, the Communist Youth League in Guangdong even enlisted scholars to draft legislative proposals aimed at criminalising the 'deliberate creation and malicious dissemination of news events' (Private communication).

Yet, 2014 to 2016 also marked a peculiar window of opportunity. Before the *Southern Weekly* incident, social media platforms such as Sina Weibo had already become spaces where news and social movements interacted and resonated with each other. However, the subsequent purge and censorship of the newspaper industry drove journalists to shift to new internet-based news production platforms, especially mobile news apps. At the time, these commercial platforms offered double the salaries and benefits, along with the promise of faster and broader possibilities enabled by new technology. As traditional print journalists migrated to the internet, the burgeoning online news landscape—vast yet understaffed and, at the time, not strictly barred from publishing original content—created a demand for content producers outside the conventional media ecosystem.

When traditional media faced increasingly strict censorship, news apps and Weibo, enabled by smartphones and mobile internet, offered a more flexible space for expression. During this period, WAN produced a series of reports and commentaries that sparked nationwide media follow-up, achieved through collaborations with the content production teams of major internet portals such as Netease (网易) and Phoenix News (凤凰网). Notable examples include the exclusive coverage of the sexual harassment incident involving an archaeology professor at Xiamen University (Li and Luo 2014; Li and Hua 2014), and the Gao Yanmin case, in which a woman who was trafficked to a remote village was promoted by the local government as a moral role model because of her involvement in rural education. The former incident prompted the Ministry of Education to issue its first-ever anti-sexual harassment directive, while the latter raised public awareness about and advocacy for legal reforms addressing the trafficking of women. Similarly, during the advocacy for China's first domestic violence law in 2014 and 2015, we at WAN partnered with nearly all major news portals to host roundtable discussions and expert Q&A sessions, using these platforms to inform the public about women's organisations' legislative proposals.



'Woman Creates Characters', artwork by Ke Qianing exhibited at the 2013 Women's Creativity Art Festival curated by the Guangzhou feminist community. Source: Ah Shan.

A Shifting Demographic

In 2016, state media outlets were compelled to pledge loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party leadership, with President Xi suggesting 'the media must bear the party's surname' (Associated Press 2016). This move underscored a tightening grip on journalistic institutions, particularly traditional media outlets, under the Chinese Government's propaganda apparatus. The shift diminished the media's capacity to resist censorship. Investigative reporting on corruption and judicial injustice—hallmarks of watchdog journalism—suffered a significant decline as some seasoned journalists in these areas were purged from the industry.

About the same time, the crackdown on feminist activism that had begun in 2014 with reporting bans and the blacklisting of some feminists became routine. The 2017 Foreign NGO Law further intensified these pressures and cut off key funding sources for femi-

nist advocacy groups. As a result, the feminist movement shifted from organised actions to a dual form of 'networked' activism, transitioning from formal organisations to informal networks and substituting online advocacy for traditional on-the-ground efforts.

The social media void created by the crackdown on civil rights movements and public intellectuals was quickly filled by young women. In 2016, the 'Reject Girls' Day, Celebrate Women's Day' (反三七, 过三八) online campaign, spearheaded by WAN, unexpectedly drew widespread participation from strangers across the internet (Wang and Driscoll 2019). That same year, the assault of a young woman who fell victim to unprovoked violence at a hotel in Beijing, widely known as the 'Wanwan Incident' (弯弯事件), generated enormous online attention, to the point that it was flagged in user reports on Weibo for its overwhelming traffic (Fan 2016).

Young women influenced by the feminist movement have become the dominant demographic on social media, shaping the trajectory of journalism at a time when its watchdog function has already been severely weakened. The 2018 ‘Tang Lanlan incident’ (汤兰兰事件) is a telling example. The case involved the sexual assault of a young girl by multiple perpetrators more than a decade earlier. Individuals who by then had completed their sentences were calling for the case to be retried, claiming they had been wrongfully convicted due to brutal coercive interrogations. News outlets predominantly framed the case as a miscarriage of justice, which triggered significant backlash among female audiences on social media. The controversy revealed how female-driven public opinion prioritises issues of sexual violence while demonstrating less understanding or concern for one of traditional investigative journalism’s core themes—procedural justice (Xiao 2018).

Operators of some media platforms have told me that more than 70 per cent of their readers are women. This demographic shift helps explain why, even as feminist and LGBTQI+ accounts are routinely censored on social media, topics such as women’s marital property rights, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and the relatively ‘less politically sensitive’ activism of the veteran feminist generation are receiving increasing attention in Chinese media.

As journalism in China continues its decline, the profession faces two contrasting trends: a shrinking pool of reporters, particularly younger ones, and a growing proportion of women in the field—now exceeding half of the media workforce (All-China Journalists Association 2022; Shi 2022). This figure does not even account for the non-fiction platforms that lack formal news-gathering and editing credentials, where women dominate many of the fragile yet determined outlets still committed to in-depth reporting.

This generational and gender shift can be traced to structural changes in the media industry. Once the state reined in previously market-driven and semi-autonomous news organisations, journalism lost its appeal as a profession that offered high salaries, a sense of personal heroism, and individual acclaim. At the same time, the boom in internet startups absorbed many male journalists as they left the newsroom for other business ventures. Another factor is the sensitivity of commercial non-fiction platforms to

audience markets. Female journalists, inspired by feminist activism, are often more motivated and better equipped to produce content that resonates with women audiences—a demographic increasingly central to these platforms’ survival.

#MeToo and Its Aftermath

During the #MeToo movement that swept China between late 2017 and 2018, as mainstream news organisations reverted to their role as state mouthpieces, they also often failed to cover feminist online collective actions or ‘politically sensitive’ sexual harassment cases. More troublingly, after losing their mass readership and respectable market revenues, some official media outlets went so far as to aid information manipulation in favour of e-commerce mogul Richard Liu during his lawsuit in the United States, attacking the survivor of his alleged sexual assault in Minnesota (Li 2023).

In contrast, the outlets supporting survivors and promoting accountability were largely alternative media and non-fiction platforms that lack formal press credentials. One journalist told me she ‘saw every journalist I know’ at a public rally ahead of a #MeToo case hearing: female reporters, inspired by the movement, showed up as chroniclers of this pivotal moment. Despite the suffocating censorship, some room for discussion of feminist issues and action remains compared with other more sensitive topics. This allows journalists covering feminism in China to maintain a sense of professional autonomy and accomplishment, motivating them to continue writing and reporting.

In an increasingly constrained media environment, reporting driven by women journalists and catering to predominantly female audiences continues to uphold journalism’s watchdog role. One example is *People* (人物) magazine and its online platform, whose readers and reporters are essentially all women. At the onset of Covid-19, the magazine highlighted the stories of female healthcare workers, addressing social media users’ demand to ‘make women workers visible’. These narratives not only resonated with a growing female user base but also subtly revealed critical public information about the early days of the pandemic. One such report about Ai Fen, the emer-

agency room director who was among the earliest to disclose the outbreak and was later reprimanded by the police, even became a meme for internet users resisting censorship during the crisis, showcasing the enduring power of storytelling in challenging authoritarian constraints (Kuo 2020).

In the mass murder incident in Zhuhai in November 2024, when a motorist rammed his vehicle into an unsuspecting crowd, killing dozens (Ng et al. 2024), I witnessed in a social group for women journalists how they encouraged each other to go to the scene and seek out the truth. The moment of sisterhood marked a stark contrast with the so-called golden age of journalism more than a decade ago, when the organisers and opinion leaders within the journalist community were exclusively male.

During the Zhuhai incident, independent female journalists provided the earliest on-the-ground reporting. I would like to close this essay with a comment that a woman journalist posted on WeChat in response to the Zhuhai report: ‘Don’t let the authorities define what it means to do journalism, nor institutions or leaders ... We determine for ourselves how to honour our professional training.’ The feminist movement’s journey to reach the public has been a long and deliberate effort. The younger generation it has nurtured will play a crucial role in sustaining the resilience of journalism, ensuring the public’s right to be informed even in the face of harsh censorship. ■



Dasheng published a special program 'The Cost of Telling the Truth in China: Lao Dongyan Targeted by Online "Big-Character Posters" and More' in which Vivian Wu discussed the rising cost of speaking out in China, from online attacks to enforced silence under real-name internet rules. Source: Dasheng Media.

Loud and Mighty

Navigating the Future of Chinese Diasporic Media

Vivian WU

Chinese diasporic media operates in a fragmented, turbulent landscape, facing state censorship, financial constraints, and credibility challenges. While demand for unfiltered, high-quality journalism is growing, media outlets struggle with sustainability and market fragmentation. The White Paper Movement highlighted the critical role of diasporic media in amplifying censored voices. Meanwhile, institutional US media faces limitations in covering China due to financial and editorial constraints. Drawing from two decades in journalism and the author's experience founding the independent media platform Dasheng (大声), this essay examines how such initiatives can rise above these challenges and redefine the future of Chinese-language media.

The Chinese diasporic media operates within a fragmented and turbulent environment. It is exceedingly difficult to deliver uncensored, meaningful content that can connect communities and reflect the complex realities of life both within and outside China. Over the past decade, Xi Jinping's administration has tightened its grip on Chinese society by expanding state control and pursuing an aggressively nationalist and increasingly isolationist agenda, which has curtailed freedoms, reshaped China's global relations, and eroded spaces for independent thought and dissent. This has triggered a new wave of outbound migration, reshaping the Chinese diaspora. The emigration of Chinese elites and newly affluent individuals has introduced an

influx of fresh talent and perspectives to the diaspora. At the same time, Hong Kong has witnessed the erosion of its democracy and the collapse of its once vibrant market for independent publications and media. In this evolving context, overseas Chinese diasporic media and social platforms have become not just more diverse but also increasingly active and more significant in offering uncensored, alternative content, reflecting both opportunities and challenges.

Demand for unfiltered news in Chinese language among Chinese readers both within China and in the diaspora is huge and growing. While the White Paper Movement that erupted across China in late 2022 against the government's draconian Zero-Covid policy served as a recent and prominent trigger for political expression and civic participation within China (Connery 2022), coverage of the protests also underscored longstanding issues and growing market demands within the Chinese diaspora for information from both outside and inside the Great Firewall. As 2025 unfolds, I find myself taking pride in the work at *Dasheng* (大声), a community-driven, independent media enterprise that seeks to confront these challenges head-on. In just one year, I have established *Dasheng* as a thriving media platform. My motivation for establishing *Dasheng* and the path I have taken to explore a way forward for overseas Chinese media professionals may offer insights into how a veteran journalist can forge a new road for the diasporic media.

A Watershed Moment

On a brisk November evening in 2022, I sat on the couch in my New York residence, perusing Chinese social media timelines. On WeChat, I encountered numerous posts from friends who are predominantly liberal-minded intellectuals and civil society practitioners. My feed was inundated with videos and photographs taken in the streets of Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Guangzhou—scenes that appeared almost surreal. Demonstrators congregated in urban centres, vociferously proclaiming slogans such as ‘Down with the Chinese Communist Party’ and ‘We demand a free press’, while brandishing sheets of blank white paper—silent yet resolute emblems of defiance. That night initiated what would subse-

quently be called the ‘White Paper Movement’, an extraordinary and unparalleled protest against the Chinese Government’s stringent Covid-19 restrictions. Driven by valour and latent resentment towards the governance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it was entirely decentralised and primarily spearheaded by urban youth.

An intense fervour drove me into action at that precise moment. My sole intention was to tweet updates and inform the world about the events occurring in China. I was profoundly affected by the bravery of those Chinese people who stood up to voice their concerns. The largest, most diverse public demonstration in China in years, the White Paper protests validated a conviction I have always maintained: even amid control and coercion, courage endures within individuals. This constituted genuine news, as for too long the world had been inadequately informed about China’s unvarnished reality due to the difficulties the international media faces in accessing genuine perspectives from ordinary individuals within the country.

In the subsequent 24 hours, I dedicated myself to chronicling the events. I posted videos, photographs, and translations on Twitter (now X), aiming to provide context for an international audience. My Twitter account experienced a surge in retweets, new followers, and quoted responses. While I did not care for fame, I was exhilarated that my tweets had emerged as a crucial, verified resource for international media organisations. As the events transpired, it took international media outlets several hours to grasp the significance of the situation. In the meantime, I provided my expertise as a professional journalist and analyst on social media. This helped establish me as a trusted media source for further reporting initiatives, as I provided essential insights and clarifications to a worldwide audience.

The experience was surreal, observing the bravery of the protesters and recognising the distance I had travelled from my former position in traditional media. Strangely, I felt lucky to no longer be employed as a BBC editor in Hong Kong. Had I remained in that newsroom, it would have been exceedingly difficult to report on the protests with the requisite speed and urgency. Bureaucratic obstacles—risk evaluations, flight reservations, team organisation, and reporter safety assurances—would have delayed us. By the time we arrived on the scene, the protests might have

already been quelled. That day reaffirmed both my reasons for departing from traditional media and my lasting commitment to journalism, even beyond its conventional frameworks.

The White Paper Movement was not just a pivotal event but also a wake-up call, underscoring the enduring demand for uncensored, meaningful news narratives among Chinese-speaking communities and revealing the persistent shortcomings of existing platforms. Reflecting on my involvement in covering this movement, I recognised how deeply it resonated with the broader challenges the diasporic media has faced over decades. This experience provided a timely lens through which to evaluate both the critical gaps and the emerging opportunities in the diasporic media landscape. It reinforced the need for initiatives such as *Dasheng* to elevate discourse, bridge divides, and provide independent, uncensored content for these audiences.

The Diasporic Media Landscape Today

Dasheng was founded at a critical juncture, entering a diverse and dynamic field of Chinese diasporic media, where both established outlets and emerging voices adopt distinct approaches to telling Chinese stories beyond the mainland. Each comes with its own strengths and limitations, facing challenges of credibility, sustainability, and audience trust in an ever-evolving media landscape.

Traditional diasporic media outlets such as *Sing Tao Daily* (星島日報), *Ming Pao* (明報), and *World Journal* (世界日報) once formed the backbone of overseas Chinese media. These publications catered to first-generation immigrants, providing news in their native language while preserving cultural traditions and bridging the gap between their homeland and host countries. For decades, these outlets represented the voices of Chinese communities worldwide, focusing on both local and global issues.

However, their relevance has been waning in the digital age. These legacy outlets, while still respected by older generations, struggle to compete with newer digital platforms and social media influencers. The transition to digital formats has been uneven, and

their content often feels disconnected from the younger, tech-savvy diasporic audiences who prefer faster, more interactive, and multimedia-driven platforms.

In the past two decades, digital media has transformed the landscape entirely. Platforms such as *Wenxuecity* (文學城) and *Boxun News* (博訊新聞) pioneered this shift, providing alternative narratives and unfiltered discussions on China-related topics. These websites became essential hubs for overseas Chinese to access uncensored information, discuss sensitive issues, and build communities.

The emergence of social media platforms such as X, YouTube, and Telegram has further reshaped the space. Influencers and opinion leaders have built large followings by producing accessible, often emotionally charged content. Figures such as the dissident artist Ai Weiwei and independent commentators such as Wang Zhian, a former Chinese state media host, have turned these platforms into battlegrounds for free speech, amplifying uncensored perspectives and challenging authoritarian narratives.

However, this rapid growth is not without drawbacks. The lack of professional editorial standards among new media creators often results in sensationalism and misinformation. The pursuit of clicks and followers has skewed priorities, sidelining in-depth reporting in favour of eye-catching, emotionally satisfying content.

International outlets such as *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have also entered the landscape, offering translations into Chinese of their English-language reporting. While these platforms provide valuable information, they often fail to resonate on a deeper level with Chinese-speaking audiences. The translated content is tailored for an English-speaking readership, leaving Sinophone readers feeling alienated and disconnected.

These efforts by international outlets, while important, underscore the gap with truly engaging, original reporting that speaks directly to the unique concerns and cultural nuances of Chinese-speaking audiences. Instead of building a bridge between global perspectives and the Sinophone world, these Chinese-edition platforms often feel like an afterthought, offering content that lacks the authenticity and cultural sensitivity required to connect meaningfully with their intended audience.

The rise of grassroots initiatives and independent media projects has brought fresh perspectives to the landscape. Platforms such as *China Digital Times* (中国数字时代), *Initium Media* (端传媒), and independent student-led publications such as *Mang Mang* (莽莽) and *Tying Knots* (结绳志) have redefined the boundaries of diasporic media. These outlets combine investigative journalism, cultural commentary, and innovative storytelling to engage younger, more globally minded audiences.

Social media accounts such as Teacher Li on X (@whyoutouzhele) have emerged as vital sources of real-time information, aggregating and disseminating censored content to audiences both inside and outside the Great Firewall. These grassroots efforts often rely on small teams and limited resources but have proven remarkably effective in amplifying independent voices and fostering critical discourse.

Challenges

The landscape of Chinese diasporic media is shaped by a complex set of challenges, both tied to and independent of Chinese state influence. While Beijing's far-reaching propaganda efforts continue to shape narratives and suppress dissent, these media outlets also grapple with structural issues common to independent journalism, including financial instability, audience trust, and the struggle to uphold journalistic integrity in an era of digital disruption. As a result, diasporic Chinese media must navigate not only political pressures but also the broader crisis of sustainability and credibility that affects media industries worldwide.

First, there is the issue of censorship and propaganda. The CCP's 'external propaganda' (大外宣) campaign has profoundly shaped the diasporic media landscape. Through acquisitions of overseas Chinese-language media outlets and strategic funding of local news outlets outside China, Beijing has extended its influence far beyond its borders (Maiko 2024). These state-backed entities operate as extensions of the CCP's domestic propaganda machinery, disseminating narratives that glorify Chinese nationalism and reinforce the Party's ideological control.

One example is *Sing Tao Daily* (星島日報), one of the largest Chinese-language newspapers in North America, which was once a privately owned Hong Kong-based media outlet but has increasingly leaned towards pro-Beijing messaging. In 2021, its US edition was registered as a 'foreign agent' under the US *Foreign Agents Registration Act* due to its ties to Chinese state media. Similarly, platforms such as the China News Service (中国新闻社), originally a domestic news agency, have actively expanded into diasporic communities, disseminating CCP-approved content while portraying themselves as independent news sources.

This influence stifles independent voices and leaves limited room for genuine, alternative reporting. Even audiences outside China often find themselves caught in a web of manipulated narratives, as CCP-funded outlets flood the space with state-approved content. For independent media, combating this well-funded machinery is like fighting a giant with limited resources.

A second challenge derives from the fragmentation of the diasporic media landscape and subsequent market constraints. Compared with the Chinese State's external propaganda operations, diasporic Chinese media is deeply fragmented, shaped by linguistic, generational, and ideological divides. On one hand, there are the legacy media platforms mentioned above, such as *Ming Pao* or *Sing Tao Daily*, which still cater to older generations. On the other hand, digital-first platforms and social media influencers target younger, tech-savvy audiences. This divide results in a lack of cohesive vision or strategy, leaving independent outlets unable to compete with state-backed propaganda or traffic-driven sensationalist content.

This fragmentation also dilutes the impact of diasporic media. Each outlet or platform operates in its own niche, often without collaboration or unified efforts to present a strong counternarrative to CCP-driven messaging. This situation adds to the financial challenges faced by many diasporic outlets. Many independent outlets rely heavily on donations, subscriptions, or advertising revenue to sustain their operations. Securing consistent financial support is difficult in a cutthroat digital environment where large, well-funded entities (both state-backed and commercial) dominate.



Vivian Wu, through her series 'Vivian Wu – Global Lens on China' on *Dasheng*, seeks to broaden the scope of perspectives and topics in Chinese-language media. Source: Dasheng Media.

This resource scarcity limits the ability to produce in-depth, original reporting or to maintain professional editorial standards. Instead, many outlets are forced to compromise on quality, focusing on easily produced content that attracts clicks but lacks journalistic depth. Sustainability becomes even more precarious when these outlets face cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and harassment—tactics often employed to undermine their credibility and operations.

Market constraints on quality diasporic journalism also arise from the audience themselves. Decades of immersion in CCP-controlled media have shaped the consumption habits and expectations of many Chinese audiences. Even after emigrating, these audiences often carry the same frameworks of consumption, favouring content that aligns with their biases and emotional needs. This creates a demand for sensationalist, low-quality content that reinforces their existing world views.

For content creators, this demand incentivises the production of emotionally satisfying but shallow content. Instead of prioritising fact-checking,

investigative reporting, or thoughtful analysis, many outlets cater to what can be called 'emotional value' (情緒價值)—content designed to provoke anger, provide catharsis, or entertain. This cycle perpetuates a poorly informed audience and further devalues meaningful journalism.

Another common challenge that the diasporic media faces is narrative integrity and journalistic standards. Years of CCP-controlled media have eroded the originality and vibrancy of the Chinese language itself. As noted by scholars such as Geremie Barmé (2018), state control over media and language has led to a narrowing of linguistic diversity and expression, with the language of propaganda becoming pervasive in both official and public spheres, stifling critical thought and genuine creativity. Propagandistic language, which glorifies Chinese imperialism, enforces ideological conformity, and fuels hyper-nationalism, has seeped into the broader discourse, both inside and outside China. This also extends to the diaspora, where politically motivated rhetoric frequently overshadows sincere storytelling.

Younger generations in the diaspora also face linguistic barriers. Many descendants of Chinese immigrants lack the language proficiency to engage meaningfully with Sinophone media, while older generations struggle to adapt to digital platforms. These generational and linguistic gaps further complicate the ability of diasporic media to create content that resonates with a diverse audience.

The lack of integrity and narrative diversity are compounded by the proliferation of new media platforms such as YouTube and X. Digital technologies have created new opportunities for free expression but also led to a race to the bottom in terms of quality. As mentioned above, many content creators prioritise traffic, sensationalism, and emotional engagement over accuracy, integrity, and depth.

The dominance of emotionally charged content—whether it is ranting, outrage-driven videos, or click-bait headlines—creates a cycle in which audiences become accustomed to shallow reporting. Serious journalism struggles to compete with these low-value offerings, further eroding public trust in the media. As a result, the line between commentary, activism, and journalism becomes increasingly blurred, undermining the credibility of the entire diasporic media ecosystem.

The obstacles to building trust in Chinese diasporic media are further complicated by the existence of Falun Gong-affiliated outlets such as *The Epoch Times* (大纪元) and *New Tang Dynasty* (新唐人). These outlets have created a robust matrix of content production aimed at dismantling CCP narratives. However, their strong religious and political tendencies often undermine their credibility. *The Epoch Times* has been criticised for spreading conspiracy theories and adopting a sensationalist approach that at times distorts the narratives it seeks to challenge (Roose 2020; Nguyen 2025). While they provide an essential counterpoint to CCP propaganda, their narratives are often shaped by divisive rhetoric, sensationalism, and ideological framing that alienate neutral audiences. The editorial quality and ethics of these platforms often fall short of journalistic standards. Their anti-CCP stance, while necessary in some contexts, risks being perceived as overly polemical, which compromises their ability to serve as reliable sources of information for broader audiences.

Finally, one more challenge facing many in the Chinese diasporic media is their inability to overcome ideological insularity and Cold War binarism. Over the past two decades, there has been a worrying trend towards ideological insularity within Chinese-language media, both inside China and abroad. The rise of nationalism and populism has fuelled an inward-looking narrative that rejects global perspectives and portrays the West as inherently corrupt and hostile. This shift has curtailed the openness and curiosity that once characterised Chinese media, stifling the exchange of ideas and reinforcing an echo chamber of hostility and arrogance.

This insular mindset is mirrored in the diasporic media landscape, where demand increasingly reflects a similarly insular, nationalist, and hypercritical attitude, with China and its government as the subjects of relentless critique. For content creators who aim to produce globally informed, high-quality journalism, this environment is deeply frustrating. The audience's declining interest in serious journalism and their preference for simplified, emotionally charged narratives further marginalise thoughtful, nuanced content.

Dasheng: A New Path for Diasporic Media

Dasheng was born out of frustration and hope—frustration with the fragmented, toxic state of diasporic media and hope, or rather belief, that high-quality media can exist even in a chaotic and often hostile environment. It is not about chasing trends or amplifying noise; it is about creating something meaningful. I did not want *Dasheng* to be just another platform. I wanted it to be a space where real conversations happen, where stories are told with care, and where critical thinking is encouraged. I wanted *Dasheng* to feel like a home for people who are tired of the same old sensationalism and political echo chambers, a place where they can come to think, discuss, and connect. *Dasheng* is my experiment in building a kind of media that values depth, honesty, and humanity over clicks, likes, and outrage.

At *Dasheng*, we publish original content that focuses on long-form journalism and cultural criticism, thoughtful analysis, and storytelling that do not rush to conclusions, with the kind of rigour and



Dasheng made its name by amplifying the voices of leading thinkers such as the political economist Xu Chenggang. Source: Dasheng Media.

care that often seem lost in today's media landscape. *Dasheng* is not just about reporting on events; it is also about trying to make sense of them, placing them in context, and asking questions that matter. It is a way to broaden the conversation beyond the headlines. More than a publishing platform, *Dasheng* is also a space for interactions. Our community side allows people to share their own stories and perspectives. Whether through forums, blogs, or comments, it is a place where voices can be heard and ideas can collide.

We extend *Dasheng's* presence through platforms such as YouTube, X, and podcasts, allowing us to connect with diverse audiences in different formats. Our YouTube channel has become a cornerstone of our work, featuring video interviews, personal commentaries, and short documentaries. Through this medium, we have tackled issues such as censorship, diasporic identity, and the generational erosion of the Chinese language.

One of the most rewarding parts of building *Dasheng* has been the video interviews. These conversations form the heart of what we do, offering

unfiltered insights into lives and issues often ignored or oversimplified. For example, we interviewed a Chinese feminist activist, Li Maizi, who spoke about the growing gender divide in China and the crackdown on feminist voices (*Dasheng Community* 2024b). Another conversation featured self-exiled writer Murong Xuecun, who left the country to publish his book on the Wuhan Covid-control scandal, who describes how he worked to start a new immigrant life without giving up his writing for global readers (*Dasheng Community* 2024a). Through these interviews, we aim to provide not just information but also understanding, bridging the gap between the audience and the reality shaping Chinese society.

Running *Dasheng* is not easy. As I discussed in this essay, the media environment is saturated with noise, propaganda, and low-quality content. Platforms chase traffic with clickbait and emotional triggers, leaving little room for thoughtful journalism. Add to that the CCP's external propaganda machine and its endless resources, and the task can feel Sisyphean. But this is exactly why *Dasheng* exists. We are not trying to

cater to everyone. Instead, we focus on those who are tired of the noise and looking for something real. It is a small audience, but it is meaningful—and that is what keeps us going.

For media outlets and especially startups such as *Dasheng*, sustainability is a constant battle. It is hard to keep a platform alive without falling into the trap of sensationalism or compromising editorial independence. *Dasheng* runs lean—our costs are low, and we rely heavily on community contributions. We also stay away from the traffic-driven model that dominates so much of the diasporic media space, prioritising quality over quantity, trusting that there is an audience out there who values careful, honest work. This is not just about money; it is also about building something of which people feel they are part. It is slow going, but it is the only way to build something that lasts.

Dasheng is still young, and there is a lot we are figuring out as we go. But what is clear is that there is a hunger for what we are trying to do. In less than a year, we have found not just an audience but also a community—people who care about the same things we do and who believe in the possibility of better media. This journey has been both humbling and encouraging. It is not easy to challenge the status quo, but every thoughtful comment, every shared story, and every reader who finds value in what we do remind me why *Dasheng* matters. It is not just about filling gaps in the media landscape; it is also about creating something that can inspire others to do the same.

Through *Dasheng*, I want to remind people that the media can be more than a business or a tool for influence. It can be a bridge, a mirror, a voice, and a refuge. It can challenge us, connect us, and help us see the world—and ourselves—more clearly. *Dasheng* is my way of exploring what the diasporic media could look like if we focused on quality, inclusivity, and integrity. It is a small step, but I hope it is part of a larger movement towards better, more meaningful media. I do not have all the answers, but I know that asking the right questions and creating the space for others to join the conversation are a good place to start. ■

Protesting the Party-State through Self-Racialisation

The Great Translation Movement and the Evolution of the National Character Discourse

Altman Yuzhu PENG

This essay re-examines the Great Translation Movement (GTM) as an activist-journalistic initiative that challenges the authority of the Chinese Party-State by exposing its support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Highlighting a problematic aspect of the GTM, it calls into question its oversimplified portrayal of the Chinese people, as it perpetuates national character discourse by attributing societal issues to perceived inherent traits of the populace rather than holding the regime to account. The GTM's engagement with Chinese political discourse appears to be driven by its coordinators' alignment with vEuro-American right-wing populism, fostering self-racialisation and internalised racism that ultimately distort dissent within China's political landscape.

The tweet above was posted on 7 May 2022 by a Great Translation Movement (GTM) verified account on X (formerly known as Twitter) under the handle @TGTM_Official. It was shared against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which had begun a few months earlier. The tweet includes a screenshot of a news story from Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) about the Chinese Embassy's hostile response to remarks by the US Department of State about Beijing's perceived pro-Kremlin stance on Russia's warfare against its southwestern neighbour. Highlighting popular reactions to the news on the Chinese-language internet, the tweet notes that more than 59,000 netizens



Figure 1: Screenshot of GTM tweet posted on 7 May 2022. Source: @TGTM_Official X account.

had flooded the commentary section, with most expressing support for both the Chinese Embassy and the Russian regime. Typical of a large barrage of GTM X postings within the first few months of the military conflict, the tweet provides English translations of selected comments to engage international audiences. This effort showcases how the collective behind the GTM account exposes twisted narratives of the war from within China to challenge the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In a separate journal article (Peng et al. 2024), my co-authors and I analysed the GTM as an activist-journalistic initiative that highlights the alignment of digital activism and citizen journalism within the

its stance by citing the presence and endorsement of extremist opinions on the Chinese-language internet as evidence of alignment between the regime and the population at large. However, this generalisation overlooks the complexities of political expression within a heavily controlled public sphere governed by the CCP's censorship and surveillance apparatus. By disregarding the diversity of public opinion in China about the Russo-Ukrainian war and other issues, the GTM's framing implicates all Chinese citizens, irrespective of their political views, as complicit in the authoritarian regime's rhetoric and actions.

In another instance, in commenting on the recent influx of American influencers on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu (小红书, known as RedNote or, more precisely, Little Red Book), following the US Government's attempted TikTok ban in January 2025, the GTM account even posted a tweet mockingly reminding its followers of the dog-eating tradition in certain regions (The Great Translation Movement 2025). Resorting to a highly visible racist trope that permeates global digital platforms, the tweet blatantly sought to demonise the Chinese people as a collective incompatible with modern lifestyles and ethics.

There is no doubt that pro-Kremlin commentaries remain a prominent feature of Chinese public opinion on the Russo-Ukrainian war (Wang 2024). However, pro-Kyiv voices not only are increasingly evident (Zhou and Repnikova 2024) but also have been progressively amplified on the Chinese-language internet, amid growing public distrust of Russian propaganda (Yan 2024). Beyond this specific military conflict, the Chinese-language internet is typically dominated by nationalist sentiments, with netizens frequently engaging in self-organised, pro-regime mobilisations on domestic digital platforms (Wang and Tan 2023). Within the context of an activist-journalistic initiative, this situation legitimises criticisms of individual regime supporters for their role in fueling China's nationalist politics. Still, conflating such criticism with a racially biased indictment of the entire Chinese population emerges as the other side of the same coin of pro-regime grassroots mobilisations, as it risks aligning with the longstanding racist tradition in Chinese political discourse.

Crafting Internalised Racism Out of Self-Racialisation

Traces of premodern forms of racism can be found in China's historical archives, but a fully developed racial framework did not emerge in Chinese political discourse until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, Han intellectuals sought to overthrow the minority-led Qing Dynasty in response to foreign military and economic invasions, which shattered their perception of China as a dominant and revered power (Zhao 2006). Informed by nationalist ideologies originating from Europe, this racial framework facilitated the aggressive growth of Han supremacism in China, serving as an ideological tool to rationalise revolutionary initiatives. Racist sentiments typically idealise in-group membership of the ethnic majority within a nation-state, while justifying discrimination against such out-group members as minorities, immigrants, and foreign nationals. However, given China's significant economic and military disadvantages compared with Western powers throughout its modern history, racism in Chinese political discourse is multi-trajectory, simultaneously involving the essentialisation and criticism of a Chinese national character (國民性) that ultimately risks resulting in internalised racism (Sun 2016).

Contemporary mobilisations of the national character trope are preceded by the anti-traditionalist approaches to China's modernisation of early revolutionary intellectuals. These approaches were rooted in Eurocentric anthropological knowledge production at the turn of the twentieth century, which promoted a hierarchical categorisation of humankind that framed the 'Yellow' races to which East Asian peoples belong as inherently inferior to white Caucasians (Cheng 2011). In the meantime, they also followed Gustave Le Bon's theorisation of the 'racial mind', which is defined as an exhibition of collective behaviours, thoughts, and emotions that are latent within individuals belonging to a certain race and can manifest in group settings. Informed by social Darwinism that combines both pseudoscientific and sociopolitical observations, revolutionary intellectuals of the May

Fourth generation often firmly believed in the imperative to repudiate Chineseness (Zhao 2000). Based on a diagnosis of the backwardness of the nation's indigenous sociocultural traditions, they prescribed the emulation of white Euro-American civilisations as a solution to rebuild China into a modern nation-state and enable it to navigate the geopolitical order under Western domination (Li 2021). It is one such national character discourse that provides the historical grounds for internalised racism to manifest in much of China's political dissent today.

Translating National Character Discourse from Residence into Exile

It is worth noting that national character discourse did not necessarily pertain to political dissent during the early years of CCP rule. Many founding members of the Party either played pivotal roles in the May Fourth movement or were influenced by the social ethos it created (Li 2021). This embedded an anti-traditionalist tendency in the CCP's governance doctrines in the socialist construction era. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, the leadership even mobilised Red Guards to eliminate the so-called four olds (四旧, that is—old ideas, culture, customs, and habits) and eradicate any perceived traces of Confucianism (Zhao 2000: 8). However, the CCP's anti-traditionalist governance of that era avoided aligning with the wholesale Westernisation advocated by its founding members during the May Fourth movement. This shift occurred against the backdrop of Euro-American democracies, once China's allies in World War II, assuming the role of capitalist enemies of the then newly founded communist regime. The prominence of national character discourse was further diminished by the leadership's focus on class struggle, which sidelined state modernisation projects during Mao's tenure (Zhao 2000). It was not until the social liberalisation of the 1980s that the repudiation of Chineseness returned to the forefront of Chinese political discourse.

As an aftermath of the widespread despair towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, the second-generation leadership of the CCP sought reform measures to prevent the possible collapse of the Party-State in

the 1980s. Led by the liberal-leaning factions within the political establishment, the trend of social liberalisation was notably revealed by the state television station's production of the then hotly debated documentary series *River Elegy* (河殇). This series harshly criticised various symbols of traditional Chinese culture to try to bolster government-led reform projects by 'enlightening' the populace about sociocultural and political modernity (Xu 1992). However, while these anti-traditionalist critiques were echoed by a large cohort of liberal intellectuals, they were deemed insufficient by more 'radical' voices, including the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, who argued that they did not promote Westernisation enough (Li 2021: 50). Behind the scenes, this reflects how these liberal intellectuals envisioned Western-style democratic systems as the ideal form of government, contributing to the development of a 'beacon complex' within China's intelligentsia, which manifested as many of its members' ideological and strategic recognition of white Euro-American civilisations (Lin 2021).

After a brief period of prominence during the social liberalisation of the 1980s, the repudiation of Chineseness was gradually eradicated from state propaganda in the following decade, although it remained widespread in popular discourse until the early 2010s. After the Tiananmen protests and subsequent massacre, the CCP restored nationalism as a principal ideological tool to revamp its propaganda in an era of intensified social stratification and structural injustice, breaking its past communist promises. With the regime increasingly promoting itself as a defender of traditional Chinese culture, critiques of the Chinese national character have evolved into a less confrontational approach to subtly defy the Party-State's authority within a social milieu where 'open criticism of the communist system' is strictly forbidden, but alternative opinions are tolerated to a certain extent (Zhao 2000: 8).

Particularly after 1992, the leadership resumed reform programs on the economic front, giving rise to a large cohort of economic liberals whose discontent with the Party-State's oppressive rule is often predicated on a pro-market logic (Lin 2021). Advocating economic liberalisation as a necessary pathway to the nation's future political transformation, these intellectuals often mobilise self-racialising tropes to provide a seemingly plausible explanation for the current

state of China's political system. They interpret its perpetuation of authoritarianism being a result of the people's shared backward qualities, which have rendered them vulnerable to power and authority.

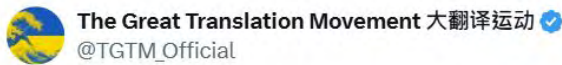
This creates an opportunity for dissent against the Party-State to incorporate racist rhetoric popularised by Euro-American right-wing populism. This alignment is rooted in the transnational influence of Western right-wing ideologies, which have a long history of promoting racist resentment against communities of colour to legitimise white de facto hegemony. In particular, populist politicians who build their support bases on such ideologies have increasingly targeted Chinese people in response to China's growing international influence, fuelling a renewed wave of Sinophobia across Euro-American societies. This narrative paradoxically resonates with many Chinese dissidents who subscribe to the national character trope and embrace an idealised vision of Western-style democracy.

Alignments

The landscape of China's political dissent has experienced notable paradigm shifts over the past two decades because of sociopolitical changes and technological advancements. Given the state's direct control over the traditional media sector, during the Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao era (2002–12), it was the once loosely regulated digital sphere that took the lead in facilitating China's civic engagement (Yang 2011). Faith in a promising future remained unshaken until Xi Jinping assumed office in 2012, marking the leadership's blatant return to hardline dictatorial doctrines. With the Party-State tightening its grip on domestic social media as part of holistic crackdowns on civil liberties, an increasing number of regime critics have migrated to international digital platforms to circumvent state censorship and surveillance. This situation, coupled with the growing size of the Chinese diaspora through increased mobility in the era of globalisation, has allowed dissent momentum to build in the international digital sphere, creating a level playing field for grassroots anti-regime struggles beyond the CCP's immediate reach.

However, uncritically glorifying dissent is counterproductive and blinds us to some fundamental realities. As seen in the examples shared at the beginning of this essay, this movement loosely adheres to a journalistic paradigm of activist intervention, staging the repertoire of witnessing events of sociopolitical significance from within China to challenge the CCP's nationalist politics. However, in a March 2022 media interview with *Deutsche Welle*, a member of the GTM collective explicitly interpreted the initiative as a struggle to 'make more foreigners aware of the true nature of Chinese people ... as a community aggregating arrogant, crucial, and self-conceited members who subscribe to nationalist ideologies and are often lacking in empathy' (Liu 2022). In line with the national character discourse, this type of narrative reinforces a racist diagnosis of China's current sociopolitical problems, shifting blame onto the entire population rather than concentrating on structural issues.

Certainly, the Party-State's mouthpieces have repeatedly attempted to discredit the initiative by cherry-picking extracts from GTM postings and taking them out of context (see, for instance, *The Paper* 2022), as part of wider campaigns to undermine any dissent. Furthermore, as a decentralised initiative, the words of a single GTM collective member cannot be taken at face value, as the team likely includes members who disagree with one another on specific matters and approaches. This is reflected in some GTM postings, in which efforts to build connections with progressive grassroots resistance from within China are manifest (for more details, see Peng et al. 2024). That said, the mere fact that the GTM poses a threat to regime stability does not automatically legitimise the entire initiative, nor does it justify attempts to sideline scrutiny of its problematic aspects in favour of illusory solidarity among regime critics. Further analysis reveals that the GTM collective has evidently planned its X postings with high-profile Euro-American right-wing populists in mind, with X accounts belonging to such controversial figures as Jack Posobiec (an American alt-right influencer) and Marco Rubio (then a US senator and Trump administration ally), among others, frequently appearing in their tags (see Figure 4). In so doing, the GTM has effectively highlighted the compatibility between anti-CCP endeavours and Euro-American right-wing populist politics at an operational level.



The Great Translation Movement 大翻译运动

@TGTM_Official



According to Chinese state-owned broadcaster CCTV, US ranks world No. 1 in all the worst metrics possible. Since it is such a shitty place, why are they so obsessed with it? 🤔

@JackPosobiec @serpentza @marcorubio @sjoerddendaas

#TheGreatTranslationMovement #大翻译运动



12:00 pm · 31 Mar 2022

288

1.7K

4.2K

128



Figure 4: Screenshot of a GTM tweet posted on 31 May 2022 tagging Jack Posobiec and Marco Rubio. Source: [@TGTM_Official X account](https://twitter.com/TGTM_Official).

To further establish an operational alignment with the Western far right, a core member of the collective behind the GTM's X account even posted a tweet vocally calling for the deportation of pro-regime Chinese immigrants from the United States, not through the official channel but via their own account operating under the GTM banner. In it, the GTM coordinator defines pro-regime immigrants' political opinions as a violation of 'the oath they took in front of [the] American flag'. On the surface, the statement emphasises opposition to the CCP's interference in American domestic politics. However, it simultaneously and blatantly legitimises a long-established right-wing ideology in Euro-American societies, vindicating anti-immigrant rhetoric on national security grounds. Posted shortly after the 2024 US presidential election results were called, the tweet

clearly throws the GTM coordinator's support behind Donald Trump and his hawkish agenda on both China and immigration-related issues.

Western democratic processes consistently display that such right-wing populist politicians as Boris Johnson, Scott Morrison, Marco Rubio, and Donald Trump enjoy(ed) widespread support among anti-CCP members of the Chinese diaspora during their terms in office. At an epistemological level, such support is predicated on the 'beacon complex' of these overseas dissidents who recognise Western liberal democracies in their orthodox shapes as both political systems and civilisations superior to the rest of the world. Seizing the opportunity presented by the current failures of the neoliberal market, right-wing populist leaders shift the blame for the current crises facing Euro-American societies onto their progressive

opponents, blaming them for deviating from white Western traditionist values, which they claim is the cause of the crises. In line with the historical evolution of national character discourse, which is compatible with Euro-American right-wing populism, this world view primes these Chinese dissidents' voluntary investment in the reactionary causes promoted by these far-right leaders aimed at restoring the 'past glories' of Western democracies and civilisations (Zhang 2024).

Beyond ideological compatibility, these Chinese dissidents' involvement in Euro-American right-wing causes is evidently strategic as well. Indeed, the Party-State must be held accountable for its crackdowns on civil liberties and mistreatment of minorities and marginalised groups. However, seizing the opportunity to veneer their anti-globalisation posture, contemporary right-wing populist politicians are typically frontrunners in mobilising anti-China tropes to consolidate their political bases, as evidenced by the Sino-US trade war during Donald Trump's first presidential term (Ha and Willnat 2022) and the imposition of sanctions on China's high-tech firms by Western allies (Christie et al. 2024), among others. It becomes apparent that many overseas Chinese dissidents, including those in the GTM, are lured in by these right-wing politicians' hawkish stance against the Party-State in international geopolitics. 'Relying on the construct of an idealised white Christian West as the embodiment of political modernity to oppose authoritarianism in China' (Zhang 2024: 11), their self-identification with right-wing causes in Euro-American societies is, thus, strategic, reiterating their fantasy of a cross-border alliance with the anti-CCP faction of the Western political establishment. This phenomenon marks a twisted political coalition in the making, underlining the wider impacts of global reactionary politics beyond the Chinese context.

The development of distorted dissent against the Party-State within the orbit of Euro-American right-wing populism is not unique to the GTM. Across the Sinophone world, this is evident in the idolisation of Trump by many prominent liberal intellectuals in mainland China (Lin 2021), the appropriation of Euro-American right-wing conspiracy theories by grassroots critics of the CCP on the Chinese-language internet (Yang and Fang 2023), as well as calls for support from Western right-wing politicians by

prodemocracy activists protesting China's interference in local affairs in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Li 2021). While ostensibly sponsoring an overarching anti-regime endeavour, this alignment contributes to nothing more than the perpetuation of self-racialisation and internalised racism, which shore up reactionary movements both within and beyond the Chinese context (Zhang 2024). This constitutes a concerning development that demands urgent scholarly intervention.

Going Beyond a Regime-Dissent Dichotomy

In this essay, I have revisited the GTM as an activist-journalistic initiative aimed at undermining the CCP's authority by holding the Party-State accountable for its strategic partner's aggression in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Challenging some of my earlier, insufficient assessments of the initiative on this matter (Peng et al. 2024), I argue that, while aiming to critique China's nationalist politics, the GTM has severely overlooked the complex processes through which nationalist sentiments and toxic popular opinions are engineered on the Chinese-language internet. Without adequate scrutiny of the sociopolitical conditions, the oversimplified takeaways presented in GTM tweets often end up reiterating the thesis of national character discourse, attributing a wide range of societal issues faced by the nation to imagined shared qualities of the Chinese people. This aligns with a racially charged axis of distorted dissent in the Chinese context, characterised by unreflective self-racialisation deeply intertwined with internalised racism. In particular, a notable feature of this racist undertone revolves around idealised imaginaries of Western democratic politics and white Euro-American civilisations. This has provided the ideological and strategic grounds for a troubling cross-border alliance between Chinese grassroots reactionary forces and Western reactionary establishments, as manifested in the GTM itself.

Today, China has repositioned itself as an emerging superpower alternative to US hegemony. The specifics of China's domestic sociopolitical context, along with its dynamic interactions with the outside world, present a complex challenge for both critical

scholars and progressive activists. Indeed, criticisms of the CCP's human rights abuses and its threats to regional geopolitical stability reflect legitimate international concerns about the Party-State's authoritarian rule. However, while it is essential to counter the oppressive regime, one should avoid uncritically glorifying dissent against it. At times, the self-racialisation, essentialisation, and dehumanisation of Chinese people, framed through the prism of national character, are evident in dissident activist-journalistic initiatives against the Party-State, such as the GTM, as well as in anti-CCP disinformation campaigns across international digital platforms, as has been noted in previous literature (Bolsover and Howard 2019).

Amid the global resurgence of right-wing populism, Cold War mentalities have regained traction across Western nations, fostering the formation of an anti-China axis in their state policymaking and public opinion. In this process, the alignment between dissent in the Chinese context and right-wing populism in Euro-American societies has emerged as an alarming development. By fuelling the momentum of global reactionary politics, it hampers the pursuit of equality, diversity, and inclusion in democratic processes across the board. With Trump's return to the White House in 2025, the vibrancy of reactionary voices is expected to continue growing on the world stage. This situation underscores the urgency for contemporary critical scholarship to move beyond a regime–grassroots dichotomy to account for the complexity of political dissent in Global South authoritarian contexts and beyond to scaffold cross-border progressive movements. ■



'Vice-Minister Gao Xiang from the Bureau of International Cooperation of the CAC during a China-South Africa New Media Roundtable Discussion, 23 November 2018.' Source: [GCIS](#) (CC), Flickr.com.

Global China and African Journalistic Agency

A Relational Perspective

Hangwei Li

This essay adopts a relational lens to examine China-Africa media interactions, focusing on the role of African journalistic agency in shaping relationships with Chinese counterparts across macro, meso, and micro levels. Drawing on interviews and multi-sited fieldwork conducted in China, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Mauritius, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of African journalistic agency in diverse contexts and propose a future research agenda.

Amid Europe's decoupling and de-risking strategies, escalating tensions with the United States, and competition with India for leadership in the Global South, China has intensified its efforts to strengthen relations with the developing world, particularly with Africa. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's ambitions in Africa are not only to become a dominant financial power, but also normative and discursive ones.

Scholars note a distinct shift in China's external messaging under Xi Jinping's tenure (see, for instance, Brown 2021). Whereas the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao era (2002-12) focused on promoting Chinese soft power,

especially Chinese culture, President Xi's leadership emphasises the 'China model' and 'Chinese modernisation', highlighting the country's non-Western model of development and its pathway to modernisation (see, for instance, Wang 2023). For instance, during the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2024, China emphasised its own modernisation experience as an alternative to the Western approach in providing development assistance to Africa (Li and Hackenesch 2024).

China's push to promote its development model in Africa and beyond relies heavily on its media organisations to shape the discourse and narratives. These organisations have produced a vast array of content—spanning newspapers, radio, television, and social media—on the global impacts of various initiatives announced by Xi, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, launched in 2013), the Global Development Initiative (GDI, 2021), the Global Security Initiative (GSI, 2022), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI, 2023). Their coverage of Chinese engagement with Africa often highlights themes such as 'win-win cooperation', 'infrastructure-led growth', 'a community with a shared future for humanity', and, more recently, 'high-quality growth' (see, for instance, China Daily 2024; CGTN 2024). Through this messaging, they aim to project China as a benevolent partner committed to addressing Africa's development needs. For example, Chinese-funded projects in Africa are frequently accompanied by high-profile ribbon-cutting ceremonies at which local leaders praise China's 'no-strings-attached' approach to aid (Tian 2024). These events receive extensive coverage in Chinese media and are frequently reproduced or re-aired by African media outlets under content-sharing or partnership agreements (Li 2023). Chinese media organisations also translate many of these articles into Chinese, targeting domestic audiences to bolster their legitimacy and reinforce China's positive image at home.

Despite the highly 'mediated' nature of China–Africa relations (Li 2017), much of the scholarly work and policy debate on this topic has focused on China's economic engagement with Africa—such as mega-infrastructure development and financial investments, particularly under the BRI (see, for instance, Kopiński et al. 2023; Wang 2022; Li et al. 2022). In contrast, China–Africa media relations and interactions remain relatively underexplored, especially within

development studies and the field of international relations. Media scholars have been more active in this area. Their work has primarily explored how various Chinese actors (including governments, embassies, and media outlets) engage with African media houses (Wekesa 2013; Wu and van Staden 2021), the media representation of China in African outlets compared with Western and Chinese media (Li 2021; Matanji 2022), media content produced by Africa-based Chinese organisations (Madrid-Morales 2016; Marsh 2023), their influence on African audiences (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018; Xiang 2018; Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2022), and the public diplomacy strategies employed by Chinese media as they expand their presence in Africa (Li and Wang 2023). Additionally, Umejei (2020) has explored what it is like for African journalists working in Chinese media organisations based in Africa, examining their daily aspirations and struggles, particularly how they navigate the collisions and collusions within Chinese newsrooms, while emphasising the importance of understanding their voices and experiences.

However, Chinese media engagement with Africa extends beyond establishing media houses and producing content from the continent; it also involves personal and organisation-level interactions between African newsrooms and Chinese organisations. Thus, beyond Africa-based Chinese newsrooms, a closer look at how African journalists and media organisations respond to and engage with Chinese offers and initiatives becomes increasingly important. To advance the study of China–Africa media relations, I argue that we can simultaneously engage with Franceschini and Loubere's (2022) proposition of 'Global China as Method'—an approach that emphasises that China cannot be examined in isolation but must be conceptualised as an integral part of the global capitalist system—and Franks and Ribet's (2009: 135) call for a scholarly approach that 'prioritizes and appreciates African agency' within contemporary China–Africa media relations. I suggest that we must adopt a relational lens to examine China–Africa media interactions, while focusing on the role of African journalistic agency—particularly how China's relational approaches are received, interpreted, negotiated, and contested by African journalists and media organisations across diverse contexts.

In the following discussion, I first provide an overview of a relational perspective to understand China–Africa media interactions and then unpack African journalistic agency across macro, meso, and micro levels. This essay draws on years of fieldwork and in-depth interviews with Chinese and African media personnel (including journalists, editors, and editors-in-chief), as well as government officials in China, Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Mauritius.

China–Africa Media Interactions: A Relational Perspective

When examining China–Africa media interactions, particularly among journalists, a relational perspective is often missing. While scholars have increasingly focused on China’s relationship-building and networking efforts with politicians and business elites—especially the Chinese Communist Party’s party-to-party cooperation with African political parties (Benabdallah 2020a; Hackenesch and Bader 2020)—the same level of analysis is not consistently applied to China’s expanding media networks in Africa, particularly the everyday interactions between Chinese and African journalists, both within and outside newsrooms.

Under Xi Jinping, China has actively worked to ‘expand its partnerships and build stronger networks with elites across the world’ (Benabdallah 2020b: 100). This includes efforts to expand its media and journalistic networks with African partners, particularly through media training programs. These programs, funded by Chinese institutions, aim to familiarise participants with China’s development story, governance model, and political ideology. While such exchanges are framed as ‘capacity-building’, they also promote Chinese media norms, which favour state-centric narratives and prioritise political stability over press freedom. For African journalists, these programs also serve as platforms for socialising Chinese values, norms, and expert knowledge (Benabdallah 2020b). In addition to training programs, China has initiated the China–Africa Press Center Program and the Belt and Road News Network, both of which count many African media organisations as their members. Furthermore, at the latest FOCAC, China

announced plans to facilitate the development of the audiovisual industry in Africa through program exchanges, joint production, technical cooperation, mutual visits, and personnel training, as well as to support the construction of the Converged Media Center of Africa for joint production of films and TV programs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). These programs foster the accumulation of *guanxi* (关系)—a term denoting personal or social connections, or social capital—between Chinese and African journalists. Such networks play a crucial and enduring role in cultivating what Benabdallah (2020b) terms ‘relational productive power’.

Furthermore, these expanded media and journalistic networks facilitate the implementation of other relational strategies that the Chinese authorities seek to establish or strengthen. As outlined in the latest FOCAC Beijing Action Plan (2024–27), the Chinese Government plans to launch new network initiatives, including the Global Development Promotion Center Network, the China–Africa Knowledge for Development Network, and the China–Africa Think Tank Cooperation Network, alongside the establishment of 25 China–Africa research centres (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). The activities of these new networks are likely to be heavily covered by the China–Africa media networks, creating a self-reinforcing system of relational influence.

In addition to the initiatives mentioned above, Chinese media organisations have intensified their efforts to forge new partnerships with leading African media organisations. These efforts have been spearheaded by top executives from leading Chinese media outlets. For example, in August 2023, the President of Xinhua News Agency visited Zambia and signed agreements with major local media outlets, including the Zambia News and Information Services and the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation, aiming to enhance collaboration in areas such as news exchange and journalist training (Xinhua 2023). By embedding itself within African media ecosystems through training programs, institutional partnerships, and the expansion of relational networks, China aims to advance its narratives while cultivating long-term influence. However, the extent to which African media organisations and journalists respond to and participate in these expanding networks depends heavily on African journalistic agency, as I will discuss in detail below.

African Journalistic Agency

To add nuance to the analysis of African agency in response to China's external communication, in my earlier research, I proposed the concept of 'African journalistic agency', which I defined as 'the ability of African organizations to proactively manage specific journalistic goals and navigate interactions with foreign media and relevant stakeholders through strategic collaboration, negotiation or resistance to external influence' (Li 2024: 5). Empirical evidence suggests that the extent of this agency is heavily influenced by the political economy of the African media, which determines how African media organisations and individuals navigate their relationships with their Chinese counterparts.

At the macro level, China–Africa media relations are characterised by stark asymmetries and structural imbalances, including significant disparities in personnel, organisations, training, resources, capital, and audience reach (Madrid-Morales 2021; Li 2023). Bilateral agreements under initiatives such as FOCAC influence the structure of media collaborations, often prioritising China's strategic interests. In multiple interviews I conducted with African diplomats in Beijing between 2021 and 2024, I discovered that unlike negotiations over loans or development finance, media cooperation between China and Africa tends to occupy a lower priority—or is sometimes entirely absent from the discussions—on the agendas of African governments ahead of FOCAC summits. Despite these ongoing asymmetries, empirical evidence suggests that China–Africa media interactions are not purely one-sided. The extent to which African journalistic agency is exercised also depends significantly on meso and micro-level dynamics.

At the meso level, organisational structures and institutional practices shape journalistic agency and the ways in which African organisations navigate their relationships with their Chinese counterparts. Media organisations with established traditions of investigative and critical reporting, especially those operating in commercially driven and open public environments, are generally better equipped to scrutinise and challenge the influence of Chinese media. In contrast, media organisations operating in more restrictive environments and lacking the financial and human resources necessary for independent

operations may find Chinese offers more appealing. In Ethiopia, for instance, media organisations face significant challenges due to stringent government control and a highly constrained economic environment. In such circumstances, the training opportunities and organisational partnerships offered by China are particularly attractive to local media organisations. As highlighted by a senior manager of the *Ethiopian News Agency*, media organisations in the country lack the resources and capacity to provide technical training for their journalists. As they told me in an interview in Addis Ababa in September 2019: 'We are very glad that the Chinese come to us and are willing to offer training to our journalists, both here in Ethiopia and in Beijing.'

Meso-level dynamics are closely tied to African 'bureaucratic agency'. Substate actors, such as bureaucrats within ministerial departments (especially each country's Ministry of Information), often play a crucial role in facilitating negotiations or collaborations between African and Chinese media organisations. Scholars have demonstrated that in executing infrastructural or developmental projects, African bureaucrats, even in smaller states, are not merely passive agents. Instead, they often employ influence strategies so that civil servants' minority views prevail (Soulé-Kohndou 2018). However, in the realm of media cooperation with China, African bureaucrats sometimes exhibit a lack of agency, primarily due to limited expertise or insufficient knowledge about Chinese media organisations. This lack of agency can be exacerbated by local political contexts and, at times, political reshuffles. For example, in Zambia following Hakainde Hichilema's rise to power in 2021, several key officials in the Ministry of Information were appointed even though they had no experience in the media or communication sectors, which further hindered effective engagement in media-related initiatives. In December 2023, I interviewed an official in Zambia's Ministry of Information who had played a key role in approving a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation and Xinhua News Agency. They were unaware of the fact that Xinhua is not a television station and mistakenly believed that the agency was China Global Television Network (CGTN).

At the micro level, the agency of individual journalists comes to the fore. Their experiences, decisions, and practices are instrumental in shaping how

Chinese narratives are received, interpreted, and disseminated within African media ecosystems. On one hand, African journalists might be receptive to the narratives promoted by Chinese media—emphasising non-interference, mutual development, and alternative models to Western liberalism. On the other hand, their experiences in China can also provide them with a more nuanced understanding of China’s political system, economic opportunities and challenges, and Beijing’s engagement with their home country. To maximise the benefits of these training experiences while mitigating potential biases, African media organisations should take a stronger role in guiding journalists’ reporting practices after they receive training in China, which could involve providing clear guidelines, offering ongoing mentorship, fostering critical discussions about media ethics and independence, and ensuring that journalists are equipped to critically evaluate the information they receive.

Meso and micro-level dynamics are deeply interconnected in shaping African journalistic agency. At the meso level, whether these organisations have established and, more importantly, implemented editorial guidelines and internal training protocols for managing foreign content is significant. When it comes to allowing their journalists to participate in training programs in China, it is essential for African media organisations to consider whether guidelines or regulations are in place to govern their conduct and reporting on their return. Several of the African journalists who were sent to China for media training whom I interviewed told me that they were approached by Chinese journalists and media managers to craft positive China-related stories after their return. Some of them also served as focal points in fostering connections between Beijing and newsrooms in Africa.

Not all African newsrooms are critical of these connections and the potential influence on their editorial independence. At the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), for example, a reporter who attended media training in Beijing and was affiliated with the China–Africa Press Centre reproduced several articles favouring China at the request of counterparts from China Media Group, the main Chinese state media outlet created in 2018 through the merger of China Central Television (incorporating CGTN), China National Radio, and China Radio International.

During a conversation we had in Nairobi in July 2019 as he was preparing for a trip to Somalia, he inadvertently remarked: ‘I’m going to China this weekend ... Oh, sorry, Somalia. I love China so much; I’m always thinking about it.’ He later explained that his visits to various parts of China, during which his hosts showcased the country’s development achievements, had shaped his perception of China and its potential to positively inform Kenya’s development journey. He added that this was why he was willing to facilitate some China-related stories to inform Kenyan audiences. Nevertheless, Kenya’s media landscape exhibits a degree of resilience and maintains traditions of critical journalism, which empower media organisations to scrutinise foreign propaganda and influence. The Media Council of Kenya, which promotes ethical standards, publicly admonished the KBC for the reporter’s articles, including one on the Chinese Government’s success in poverty reduction in Xinjiang that did not explicitly mention the source as Chinese state media, leading the organisation to delete some of these stories (WhatsApp exchange with a staff member from Media Council of Kenya, February 2021).

Even in democratic contexts, such as in Mauritius, where press freedom is relatively strong, challenges persist. According to a veteran journalist and media trainer with extensive experience, Mauritian journalists have not demonstrated sufficient critical spirit when engaging with training opportunities offered by China. There has been a lack of meaningful discussions among editors and journalists about their specific needs and goals, let alone any attempt to influence the training agenda. As a Mauritian journalist whom I interviewed in Mauritius in October 2024 told me:

When editors-in-chief have training opportunities, there should be discussions about who is offering the training and the specific needs of the newsroom. What are the needs? What will they bring back to the table? These are the questions that should be asked, rather than just focusing on who is going. This is what we expect, but it is not happening. Journalists sent to China for training should gain a broader view of media operations and the challenges China is facing, as well as how China is addressing them. When they return, they should bring

added value. However, journalists now just go, take selfies, and return. It's simply a free ticket for them, rather than a learning opportunity. I've encountered journalists who tell me: 'I'm going to China; I don't know what I'm going there for, we'll see when we get there.' There's really no roadmap for what they are going to do. It's just a freebie opportunity to travel.

While acknowledging and appreciating the resistance, pushback, and reflections demonstrated by African media organisations when engaging with their Chinese counterparts, I argue that China–Africa media relations are not always shaped by fully informed or fully prepared decision-making. The decisions of African journalists, managers, and bureaucrats are often constrained by structural limitations and their ‘relational’ experiences, which together shape the complexities of these interactions.

Suggestions for Future Research

By examining China–Africa media relations through a relational perspective and analysing African journalistic agency across the macro, meso, and micro levels, this essay highlights the need to address structural imbalances, institutional constraints, and individual agency in understanding these interactions. While macro-level asymmetries create a significantly uneven playing field, meso and micro-level dynamics illuminate opportunities where African actors can assert agency and negotiate influence, even within the context of a highly asymmetrical relationship.

How can we unpack African journalistic agency from a relational perspective? One approach is to further examine it across the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro level, while many media cooperation agreements have been signed between China and African countries, the processes through which these were negotiated remain underexplored in existing research. Understanding these negotiations could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of power and influence at a structural level. At the meso level, the role of African bureaucrats in shaping African journalistic agency is also an area that warrants further investigation. The extent to

which bureaucratic actors influence decision-making and facilitate—or hinder—media collaborations has not been widely studied. At the micro level, the everyday interactions between Chinese and African journalists can also be further explored, particularly through ethnographic studies. For instance, how do Africa-based Chinese journalists and managers affiliated with China's official media organisations socialise with their African counterparts? What do these interactions look like? What logics and motivations underpin their exchanges?

Finally, as the relationships between Chinese and African journalists and media organisations continue to evolve over time, a longitudinal examination of China–Africa media relations is necessary. For example, how do training opportunities provided by Chinese media organisations shape African journalists' world view and their perceptions of China? How do these experiences influence their reporting on China-related stories? How do organisational exchanges and cooperation impact African media's news production over the long term? Addressing these questions will be crucial to building a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of China–Africa media relations, while failing to do so will result in fragmented and incomplete insights. ■

WORK OF ARTS



Figure 1: A film photograph capturing the exhibition's public space, overlaid with an image of the artist installing the works. Source: Ruoxi Liu.

Why Do We Hold 'Family History' Exhibitions in Today's China?

Ruoxi LIU, Binghuang XU

By reflecting on the curation and execution of 'Questioning Silence: A Trio Exhibition on Family Histories' (追问沉默) by Lan Yi, Da Xi, and Huang Xiaoxing, which was held at Making Space in March–April 2024, this essay explores how conventional family narratives in contemporary China can be reinterpreted through exhibition-making. We argue that re-examining family history serves as a method to challenge official and authoritarian narratives within families and Chinese society, reinterpret power relationships, and reconstruct history.

On 30 March 2024, 'Questioning Silence: A Trio Exhibition on Family Histories' (追问沉默) by Chinese artists Lan Yi, Da Xi, and Huang Xiaoxing opened at Making Space (新造空间), an independent research-based contemporary art space on the southern banks of the Pearl River in Guangzhou, dedicated to socially engaged art through transdisciplinary collaboration. This was the second time that Making Space had hosted an exhibition centred on family history (家庭史), following Zhu Xiang's 'The Seaside Cemetery' (海边墓园) in August 2023. Along with the exhibition, the three exhibition



Figures 2–4: Lan Yi's works, *Making Space*, 2024. Source: Lin Keshi.

artists and the directors of *Making Space* also held a public-oriented workshop titled 'Family Feast' (家宴), structured as an invited dinner showcasing traditional dishes from the three artists' hometowns. These events received extensive commentary and critique, not only from the art community but also from the public. The overwhelming interest in family history demonstrated by Chinese audiences led us to exchange ideas about our own different practices via various media forms.

In this essay, we reflect on our initial motivation to hold this exhibition as artists and curators. We discuss how our understandings of family history and ways of exploring it have evolved and been enriched during the preparation and execution of the exhibition and through our collaboration. The piece examines the methodologies of doing family history, the challenges we encountered, and the layered emotions that emerged throughout the process. We conclude by considering the significance of family history exhibitions in China and their potential future directions.

Instead of providing critiques of the artworks themselves, we seek to answer the following questions: What is the significance of constructing and

reconstructing family history? Why is this necessary in contemporary China? For whom is it intended, and how should it be approached? We argue that our individual journeys in re-examining family history constitute explorations of China's past and family power dynamics through personal lenses. This process highlights the agency and resilience of often marginalised and neglected voices.

Introducing the 'Questioning Silence' Exhibition

Held from 30 March to 30 May 2024, the 'Questioning Silence' exhibition featured artistic works reflecting the family histories of the three contributors: Lan Yi, Da Xi, and Huang Xiaoxing. While we refer to all three as 'artists', it is important to acknowledge that only Lan Yi is a full-time independent artist, whereas Da Xi is a researcher, and Huang Xiaoxing works for a nongovernmental organisation and is an anthropologist.

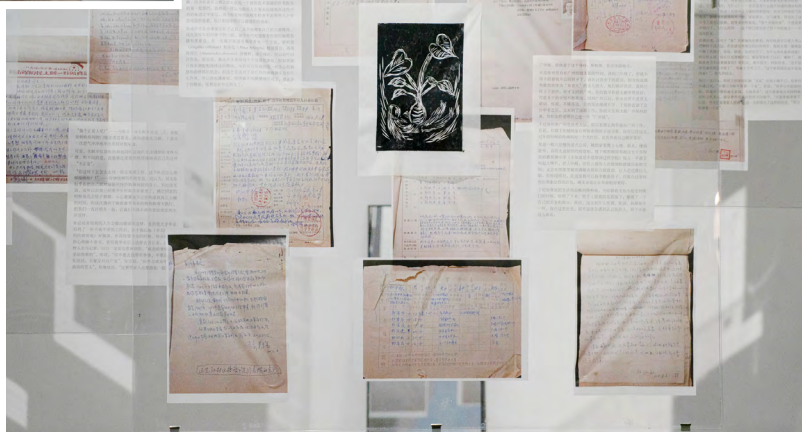


Figures 5-7: Da Xi's works, *Making Space*, 2024.
Source: Lin Keshi.

In the exhibition, Lan Yi's section (see Figures 2-4) included a timeline drawing of her grandmother's life-course, a collaborative video work with her mother, and an installation featuring various physical materials related to her grandmother. Da Xi's section (see Figures 5-7) focused on her grandfather's autobiography, complemented by her own responses and those

of other family members. Huang Xiaoxing presented a collage of writings and woodcuts reflecting on the relationships between his maternal grandfather, his mother, and himself (see Figures 8-9).

Alongside the exhibition, we organised the above-mentioned publicly oriented workshop titled *'Family Feast'*. During the gathering, the artists shared



Figures 8–9: Huang Xiaoxing's works, *Making Space*, 2024. Source: Lin Keshi.

their intentions, experiences, and emotions related to the project, and attendees, including Lan Yi's parents, shared their own reflections.

'Family History' in Chinese Contemporary Art

The 'Questioning Silence' exhibition follows a long tradition of exploring family history in Chinese contemporary art. Since the 1980s, when China transitioned to a more open and economically driven era, the contemporary art scene has evolved significantly. The 'avant-garde' movement introduced innovative ways to critique society and artistic creation (Zou 2002; Gao 2006). By the 1990s, contemporary art in China had flourished, engaging with various themes, including family history.

In the 1990s, there were only a few visual artists whose works centred on 'family'. The artists were similar in age, and their family-themed paintings or

photographs interrogated the relationship between the individual and national politics through images of a typical Chinese family, whose structure was defined by a single policy of a particular era: the One-Child Policy, which remained in force from 1979 to 2015. Under the policy, with some exceptions, including for ethnic minorities and some rural households, each Chinese family could only have one child, which was also held up as the ideal family model for the country. As a result, the 'two parents and one child image' became the stereotypical family portrait.

One well-known work was Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline: The Big Family* (1993; see Figure 11). The solemn portrayal reverberates with the One-Child Policy by illustrating the parents and the only child in the painting. Like Zhang Xiaogang's work, Wang Jing-song's photograph *Standard Family* (1996; see Figure 12) used the same portrait style to highlight the special form of the modern Chinese nuclear family. While Wang Xingwei's series *All Happy Families Are Similar* (1994) adopted a different style, the main theme of his work is also closely related to the works above.



(Left) Figure 11: Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: The Big Family*, 1993. Source: Zhang Xiaogang Studio. (Right) Figure 12: Wang Jinsong, *Standard Family*, 1996. Source: Francesca Dal Lago and Asia Art Archive.



During the same period, Lin Tianmiao's *Family Portrait* (1998) used readymade objects such as a bike in installation. Besides talking about the family as a whole, her work also illuminates the unequal position and circumstances of the woman in a family. In these works, the family is a generalised concept. In comparison, Song Dong's *Touching My Father* (1997–2011) and *The Waste Not* (first displayed in 2005) take a closer look at the relationships and perceptions within the family, featuring his father and mother.

In these earlier works, the 'family' is depicted as a complete and solid entity, with its general structure left intact. These works do not critically deconstruct the notion of family history or its underlying social structures. Instead, they aim to explore and represent the broader meaning of the family as a whole.

In contrast, in recent years, some artists have approached family history as a means of moving from a general understanding to a more critical reconstruction. For instance, Singaporean artist Sim Chi Yin's

One Day We'll Understand (2011–) is a series of works using family history as a starting point to uncover a hidden chapter of the Cold War in Southeast Asia, particularly in what are now Malaysia and Singapore. Through materials such as photographs, archival documents, and letters, Sim retraces her grandfather's journey and experiences in China after he was exiled from present-day Singapore by the colonial British Malayan Government. Her project offers a deeply personal and moving exploration of self-discovery and historical inquiry.

'One Day We'll Understand' shows that family history can be a medium for interrogating reality and contemporary society. Along with these works and the exhibits in *Making Space*, artists explore the history of migration within the family or cooperation between family members. This approach also shows us the necessity of family history as a working method: the historical scene can be reproduced in the present, and people can be rediscovered and



Figure 13-14: 'One Day We'll Understand', 2019, exhibition at Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong. Source: Sim Chi Yin.

reclaimed. The audience are not only spectators in other people's stories; they can also take actions to explore their own family history. The family history here not only acts as a historical period that can be used for chasing the 'truth' of people lost to time; it also shows the possibility of understanding family and oneself through a radically different approach. This method of uncovering the stories and critically reflecting on the history and the experiences of family members gives us a way to see the various lives, people, and family histories through the respective artworks.

'Family History' as Way of Creating

According to the introductory text to *'Questioning Silence: A Trio Exhibition'* written by the three artists, family history is often perceived as a concealed domain, shrouded in secrecy and silence. The exhibition aims to remove this veil (Family History Working Group and Making Space 2024). When You Piao, an artist and founder of Making Space, and Xu Binghuang, a curator and co-author of this essay, initiated the family history program, they were searching for a

space within contemporary art to freely engage with what they saw as some of the complexities of contemporary society. However, during this process, they encountered various barriers that made it difficult to access, reinterpret, or present family histories, both in political contexts and in personal narratives. While state censorship posed challenges for the creators, personal trauma and conflicted emotions associated with family history also contributed to self-censorship.

Xu and You also observed a lack of knowledge within the Chinese art scene about how to locate, critique, and reconstruct family history. For them, family history should not only serve as a medium for personal expression but should also engage with broader social contexts and historical legacies. Their family history-oriented practices revealed diverse interpretations, structures, and definitions of the family. However, they also noted that many individuals remain unaware of the political power underpinning the state's grand historical narrative, often leading to self-censorship and a reluctance to share complete stories. Through this exhibition, we seek to expand the meaning of family history beyond archival records, demonstrating its potential to foster participatory relationships within families and encourage self-discovery.



Figure 15: The visit of Da Xi's parents to the exhibition. Source: Ruoxi Liu.

For Lan Yi, this family history project emerged from her desire to explore her grandmother's life stories. For Da Xi, her initial goal was straightforward: she wanted to publish a book based on her grandfather's autobiography. For Huang Xiaoxing, his approach involved intertwining his family's history with his mother's and grandfather's stories through woodcut printmaking and fiction writing.

These distinct intentions engage in dialogue with one another, evolving throughout the creative process. In the introduction to her exhibition, Lan Yi describes her artistic process as a journey towards reclaiming her agency. In Da Xi's case, her focus expanded beyond her grandfather to include other family members, such as her mother, aunt, uncle, cousins, and father. Huang Xiaoxing's archival exploration of his grandfather's past serves to 'unearth the roots of daily violence that persist across generations, seeking possibilities for reshaping the future' (Family History Working Group and Making Space 2024). His reinterpretation and organisation of materials reveal underlying tensions between himself and his mother.

Family History as a Creative Methodology

The collaborative nature of this highly emotionally charged project fostered different forms of inspiration for the artists. For Da Xi and Huang Xiaoxing, this

marked one of their first artistic engagements in an exhibition space. Da Xi, formerly an ethnographer, shifted her positionality from that of a researcher to that of a peer, engaging with artists and friends from her fieldwork in Guangzhou and receiving feedback from them.

Lan Yi employed sociological methodologies, including a timeline drawing of her grandmother's life. Born in the late 1920s in rural Hunan, Lan Yi's grandmother underwent sterilisation surgery after her seventh child in the early 1960s and was detained in Guangxi during the mid-1960s on charges of 'counterrevolution', which led her to experience a severe decline in mental health. In the 1990s, after her husband (Lan Yi's grandfather) filed for divorce and remarried, she was hospitalised in Hainan. The exhibition featured the only existing photograph of Lan Yi with her grandmother, alongside an installation built from a pile of pills used to treat her grandmother's mental illness, her grandparents' divorce papers, and a large painting of an astrolabe set. These elements reflected Lan Yi's attempt to reconstruct her grandmother's personality and legacy despite the lack of records and family silence. When Lan Yi's grandmother passed away, her belongings and memories of her were discarded or fell into neglect; even her name, Su Mei, was unknown to Lan Yi until after her death in 2010.

The exhibition process deepened our collective understanding of family history through interactions with art practitioners using diverse media, as well as

engaged audiences. Life history methodology emerged as a common thread. Although unplanned at the outset, both Lan Yi and Da Xi conducted interviews with family members, incorporating their voices into their work. Lan Yi collaborated with her mother on the video *Waves, Soliloquy* (14:02 mins), while Da Xi worked with her cousin on the audio piece *Bedtime Stories* (5:52, 12:08 mins). Huang Xiaoxing, through woodcut printmaking, reimagined conversations with his mother and grandmother.

The exhibition's deeply personal and emotionally charged nature required trust and mutual understanding. Even within a supportive environment, sharing intimate narratives was difficult. Da Xi, for instance, hesitated before committing to the project, and all three artists grappled with exposing private moments to both general audiences and their own families.

Emotions ran high not only among the artists but also among visitors. During exhibition openings and the 'Family Feast' workshop, attendees expressed strong reactions. Lan Yi's parents were present, and her mother shared a particularly moving reflection. Initially, she struggled to understand why Lan Yi chose to highlight her maternal grandmother, Su Mei, rather than her grandfather, a well-regarded scientist. At home, Su Mei's name was rarely mentioned. However, after seeing the exhibition, she said with emotion that, through her daughter's work, she had finally 'seen' her mother.

Why Do 'Family History' Exhibitions Matter in Today's China?

Our motivation for this exhibition stemmed from a fundamental instinct: to uncover interwoven clues linking the past to the present. Despite the home being an intimate space where personal histories unfold, many aspects of family narratives remain obscured or overlooked. We sought to shed light on these hidden stories, as shown in the notes and reflections left by visitors to the exhibition.

The exhibition space provided a temporary yet powerful setting to bring forth individuals and histories often left unspoken in daily life, social circles, and family contexts. This was achieved not only through

the presentation of materials but also through the artists' interpretations and translations. Moving beyond conventional 'family' narratives, we reinterpreted history through a critical lens, incorporating alternative perspectives such as feminism. By challenging dominant historical narratives, we aimed to reconstruct family history as a means of both personal and collective empowerment.

The works showcased in the exhibition examined how institutional forces shape family memory, transform familial relationships, and contribute to misunderstandings and conflicts across generations. These forces, whether explicit or subtle, are transmitted through time, influencing personal identity and daily life. Through artistic practice, family history emerges as a way to respond to historical violence and reclaim agency.

Additionally, the public nature of this exhibition was deeply rooted in the artists' personal intentions to reconnect with their families, redefine familial relationships, and reposition themselves within their histories. Engaging with deeply emotional and thought-provoking narratives required significant courage. Inviting family members to participate, contribute, and review these projects further deepened the artists' personal connections.

Rather than providing definitive answers, our work sought to pose critical questions. While family history has not been a common theme in contemporary Chinese art, we hope our efforts will initiate broader discussions on this approach to artistic creation. Family, as a subject, is both an intimate and a universally relatable field—one in which everyone can engage and enact change. As noted by participants at the 'Family Feast' workshop, despite the emotional complexities involved, our work has inspired others to explore their own memories, identities, and histories. Ultimately, our experience suggests that the practice of family history should extend beyond the art gallery, fostering broader dialogue and deeper engagement within society. ■



After Art

Precarity and Expulsion in Songzhuang

Giorgio STRAFELLA

A closed "painters' park" in Songzhuang, 17 May 2024.
Source: Giorgio Strafella.

Thousands of artists and art professionals live in Songzhuang Art Village on the outskirts of Beijing, despite its decline in recent years, making it one of the most significant art spaces in the world. However, its history remains under-researched and is often misunderstood. This essay, based on the author's fieldwork and archival research in Songzhuang and Beijing between 2014 and 2024, shows how local Communist Party leadership first promoted the growth of an existing art village in 2004, only to later adopt a different model of economic development at the expense of artists and art institutions.

Wang Chunchen's 2010 monograph on the changing role of art in Chinese society opens and ends with accounts of the forced resettlement of artists and the sudden demolition of their studios in Beijing's Chaoyang District between December 2009 and February 2010. In what this prominent art critic and curator viewed as the continuation of a struggle that had begun in the 1990s, artists responded to these events with a series of protests and performances that became known as 'a warm winter' (暖冬). 'It is obvious,' he concluded, 'that the organic, spontaneous formation of cultural and artistic ecosystems has never been valued, and their existence is not considered meaningful or valuable for society' (Wang 2010: 8; my translation). As art studios, galleries, and artists are repeatedly expelled from previously 'undesirable' areas to which they have contributed to increase real estate values—echoing the process of gentrification-through-art that Saskia

Sassen (1991: 336–37) observed in New York’s Soho district between the 1960s and the 1980s—contemporary Chinese art ‘is forever drifting in search of its dreamland’ while ‘bearing the scars of social progress’ (Wang 2010: 8).

For a short period in the first decade of this century, contemporary Chinese art appeared to have found that dreamland in the town of Songzhuang, on the outskirts of Beijing. The history of Songzhuang Art Village as a slice of the intellectual and art history of postsocialist China remains under-researched. Its history defies clearcut distinctions between the official and the grassroots (民间), and cannot be subsumed under the categories of an artist-led alternative to institutional urbanism (see, for instance, Cornell 2018) or a government-led, policy-based establishment of ‘creative districts’ (see, for instance, Liu et al. 2013).

How has Songzhuang gone from representing ‘a well-institutionalized location for contemporary Chinese art’ and ‘a model for developing cultural industry’, as Meiqin Wang (2010: 188, 196) described it, to its current state of decline and even ruin? Based on field research conducted in Songzhuang and Beijing between 2014 and 2024, this essay tries to complicate both narratives, as it sheds light on how changes in local leadership, the role of international galleries, and cultural narratives of nostalgia and struggle weave the precarious conditions of life and creativity in this town where thousands of artists continue to work and live.

The Firstcomers

Songzhuang is a township comprising about 30 villages on the west side of Chaobai River, which marks the border between Beijing’s Tongzhou District in the west and the City of Yanjiao in Hebei Province on the eastern side. When the first members of Beijing’s avant-garde art scene moved to the area in 1994, they found locals willing to rent or sell vacant rural homes and other buildings, and turned them into studios. Their initial contact was Zhang Huiping, an artist from Tongzhou, who lived in Yuanmingyuan Painters’ Village (圆明园画家村) at the time. Fang Lijun was the first artist to settle in Songzhuang, and was soon followed by Yue Minjun, Liu Wei, Yang

Shaobin, Shao Yinong, and Muchen, among others; before long, they were joined by critics and curators of contemporary art Liao Wen and Li Xianting. In the second half of the 1990s, Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun established themselves as key exponents of an artistic current that Li Xianting (1993) had theorised as ‘Cynical Realism’, which was embraced enthusiastically by international collectors and critics. Renowned artist Huang Yongyu also moved to Songzhuang, in 1997. However, while his residing in the town was later publicised to increase the prestige of Songzhuang Art Village, Huang rarely interacted with the local art community.

The first artists moved to Songzhuang before the forced disbandment of Yuanmingyuan Painters’ Village in 1995. Nonetheless, that event—together with cheap housing and the presence of well-known figures of the contemporary art scene—contributed to the growth of the new art community in the following years. Furthermore, as I will discuss in this essay, the marginality vis-a-vis both the state and the market embraced by the Yuanmingyuan residents and their forced expulsion from that area in the name of urban redevelopment would later become a cornerstone of the identity of the Songzhuang art community.

Most artists who moved to Songzhuang in those early years established their studios in the low-rise brick houses and courtyards of Xiaopu Village. Songzhuang remained a predominantly rural environment of fields, farms, a few factories, and almost no amenities, restaurants, or shops—let alone art galleries or museums—with only unpaved roads connecting it to urban Beijing. As later developments would show, the Songzhuang of those years was about to enter, following Tian and Guo (2019), what may be described as a ‘peri-urban’ phase of mixed agricultural and non-agricultural land use and ambiguous property rights.

A dearth of art galleries further increased the influence of figures like Li Xianting, who could introduce art from Songzhuang’s studios to galleries and collectors in the city, as well as the importance of Beijing-based art traders who would connect Songzhuang-based artists with potential buyers. At the time, according to reports (see, for instance, Wu and Han 2019), the Public Security Bureau would not allow artists who lived in Songzhuang to stay or gather in Beijing, thus forcing them to rely on intermediaries.

In an essay for the catalogue of ‘Made in the Village’ (2003, cur. Chen Qiuchi), one of the first exhibitions dedicated to works by Songzhuang artists, art critic and curator Pi Li (2003) wrote:

The rural village—or rather, the village close to the city—provides these artists with an almost self-enclosed artistic space, where they can focus on their emotions, nightmares, and bodies. Even though they extend their artistic feelers into the outside world from time to time, they do so in a way that is entirely subjective and stubborn. Their art is just like the place where they live—far from the hubbub of the city, but unable to escape its nightmares.



Figure 1: The logo of Songzhuang Art Village on a wall in front of the Songzhuang Art Museum and Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive. Source: Giorgio Strafella, 24 May 2024.

Visions of Utopia

By 2004, between 200 and 300 artists had their studios in Songzhuang, while remaining dependent on the art market infrastructure in central Beijing. In that year, the new Community Party secretary of Songzhuang Township, Hu Jiebao, who was allied with then-party secretary of Xiaopu Village, Cui Dabai, initiated the transformation of this scattered community into ‘Songzhuang Art Village’. The central government had ordered the clearing out of inefficient and redundant township-and-village enter-

prises (TVEs), leaving factory buildings empty and slashing the revenue sources of local authorities. In 2008, Hu said that as he looked for a way to revive Songzhuang’s economy, he found inspiration in the example of Soho, New York (Meng 2008).

In Hu’s vision, Songzhuang would become a cluster of creative industries where art festivals and exhibitions would attract domestic and international art buyers, and its closed factory buildings would reopen as galleries and studios. One of the first galleries to be established and host an art festival in Songzhuang was Sunshine International Art Museum (上上国际美术馆). The gallery is owned by painter Li Guangming, who moonlighted in the construction business before acquiring the former building of a TVE furniture factory and transforming it into a vast exhibition and studio space in 2005–06. While Songzhuang’s authorities were neither the first nor the only ones in China to spearhead institutional support for the ‘creative industries’ (see, for instance, on Shanghai, He 2016: 57), Hu’s initiative pre-dated the launch of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006–10), with its emphasis on developing the creative industries and homegrown innovation, and came years before its slogans were translated into nationwide policies.

Because published materials recording the numbers and names of the artists who moved to Songzhuang in those years were often compiled under the direction of Hu Jiebao, the data may not be entirely reliable, but it is generally accepted that, between 2005 and 2008, more than 2,000 artists moved into the town. Hu Jiebao is credited with not only helping artists settle in Songzhuang, backing the creation of galleries and events, and improving basic infrastructure, but also playing a role in shaping the identity of Songzhuang Art Village by personally overseeing the publication of books collating the work and thoughts of artists, critics, and curators (see, for instance, Hu 2005; Yang 2007), as well as initiatives such as the Songzhuang Art Festival. Hu was also responsible for introducing the Songzhuang Art Village logo (Figure 1), which is still ubiquitous in the town, as local authorities encouraged businesses to incorporate it into their signage to promote the Songzhuang brand.

In this phase, Songzhuang exemplified how, as Sasha Su-Ling Welland (2018: 71) succinctly put it, ‘state surveillance of artist villages shifted to culture industry incorporation of them’. In terms of living conditions and opportunities to exhibit their art,



A shut down gallery in Songzhuang. Source: Giorgio Strafella.

however, this represented an improvement for many artists. When conversing with those who settled in Songzhuang during that era, the irony of the fact that many boundary-pushing, critically minded artists and curators owe so much to a representative of the Party-State is not lost on them.

An undated promotional booklet produced about 2007 by the Administrative Committee of the Songzhuang Cultural and Creative Industry Cluster and preserved at the Centre for Visual Studies of Peking University displays how Hu and his consultants imagined what Songzhuang would become by 2020. Alongside reproductions of Fang Lijun's paintings and a photo of Li Xianting, who in 2013 would admit—with some regret—to having advised Hu on the creation of Songzhuang Art Village (Li 2013), it shows renderings of the monumental exhibition centres that were to rise in Songzhuang and the future look of the neighbouring Tongzhou business district. Already home of 'the best contemporary Eastern art' (ACSCCIC 2007[?]: 2), Songzhuang would develop its 'art ecosystem' while also becoming a hub for China's animation and design industries. The booklet's cover reads: 'Songzhuang, China. The holy land of contemporary art.'

Sino-Bohemians and Salvage Accumulation

It is in the writings of local artists and curators from that era that the identity of Songzhuang Art Village as the offspring of Yuanmingyuan Painters' Village crystallises. The experience of that community of 'drifting' artists and writers that formed around Beijing's Fuyuan Gate starting from the mid-1980s emerges from such documents as Wu Wenguang's 1990 documentary film *Bumming in Beijing* and Wang Jifang's 1999 book *The Last Romance*. Wang's impressions from her first visit to the village in 1992 capture the lives of those 'Sino-bohemians' (Barmé 1996: 148):

What caught my eyes was a group of malnourished and pale-faced painters. They did not complain about their hardships, nor did they mention their condition of 'three-without'—without household registration, without public employment and without family. They were satisfied with being able to fill their stomachs and paint every day. (Wang 1999: 17)

The area was forcibly cleared by the authorities in 1995 and many of those artists moved to Songzhuang, carrying with them the memory of that community and its premature disbandment. Yuanmingyuan Painters' Village came to represent a certain ideal—namely, the choice of independent creativity and artistic experimentation at the expense of professional stability, material comforts, and, especially, the acceptance of, and co-optation by, official cultural institutions.

As the story that it had been founded by artists who moved there from Yuanmingyuan Painters' Village became a leitmotif, Songzhuang also came to be imagined as a new haven where artistic experimenters could aspire to a degree of independence from the forces of the Party-State and the international art market. Introducing an exhibition dedicated to the 'Songzhuang Generation' that featured art by Lu Shun, Pang Yongjie, Piao Guangxie, and Zhang Donghong among others, curator Ma Yue (2007) described Songzhuang as a reincarnation of Yuanmingyuan Painters' Village. Songzhuang artists had 'no intention of creating a Songzhuang School of Painting', observed Ma, but were united by their refusal to participate in the speculations of the art market and their distance from the art establishment. Evoking Zhou Dunyi's flower metaphors, Ma wrote: 'If the China Artists Association is the peony of Chinese art, then the Yuanmingyuan [Painters' Village] is the lily of Chinese art, and Songzhuang is simply the margins outside the margins—the wild lily in the ravine' (Ma 2007).

Looking back in 2016 at the history of Songzhuang Art Village, Beijing-based art curator and historian Wu Hong emphasised how, contrary to most art districts, Songzhuang was not the result of planned design and financial investment, but 'was formed spontaneously by artists who pursued artistic and creative freedom' (Wu 2016: 4). Wu compared Songzhuang artists to James C. Scott's 'barbarians by design', who deliberately placed themselves at the state's periphery and whose practices were permeated by 'state evasion' and 'state prevention' (Scott 2009: 8). According to Wu (2016: 4), Songzhuang artists

distanced themselves from artistically complacent mainstream modes that did not allow for independent thought, as well as ossified academic styles ... [T]he group gradually shaped

rules for how to avoid being governed, which seems to have influenced the ways that many Songzhuang artists speak and act. They treat art like life; they are warm with people and feel a responsibility to society. However, there is also a sceptical spirit that seems to have become subconscious habit, which can manifest as cynicism about social interactions or as the deconstruction of the intellectual inertia of power.

While references to Yuanmingyuan Painters' Village abound in essays and interviews on Songzhuang published during the Hu Jiebao era, and its connection to Songzhuang Art Village was all-important to the self-understanding of Songzhuang as an art community, the contrast between Songzhuang and the 798 Art Zone was almost equally important. Once the home of many art studios, 798 had come to symbolise art market speculation and the distorting influence of the superficial tastes of foreign curators and collectors (see, for instance, Shen 2007: 4).

Like Songzhuang Art Village, the 798 Art Zone had also grown on the ruins of past waves of industrialisation and represented another 'district' where local authorities had facilitated the concentration of art-related businesses. However, following sustained investment in improvements to local infrastructure, art galleries, design agencies, and even high-end restaurants moved into 798, and, by the mid-2000s, most artists had moved their studios away from the area because rents had become unaffordable. Mario Cristiani, the co-founder of the international art gallery Galleria Continua who was responsible for the establishment of its Beijing branch in the 798 Art Zone in 2004, describes the operations of many other foreign galleries in China at the time as almost akin to 'colonial' extraction: acquiring artworks at low prices from Chinese artists and selling them at highly inflated prices to foreign collectors (Cristiani 2023).

In her influential ethnography of the globalised trade of matsutake mushrooms, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015: 62) defines 'salvage accumulation' as 'the process through which lead[ing] firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced', thus 'taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control'. While Tsing's examples of salvage accumulation included ivory and whale oil, this concept can be applied to the operations of international art galleries in sites like



The Songzhuang Art Museum (front) and Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive (back).
Source: Giorgio Strafella, 24 May 2024.

the 798 Art Zone, which may be described as ‘simultaneously inside and outside capitalism’, or ‘peri-capitalist’. After all, as Tsing (2015: 63) notes, ‘all kinds of goods and services produced by peri-capitalist activities, human and nonhuman, are salvaged for capitalist accumulation’. Chinese artists created contemporary artworks as a non-capitalist value form under conditions largely defined by Party-State policies over which international galleries had no control, and often far from sites like 798—such as in Songzhuang. Thanks to the peri-capitalist function assigned to 798 by government authorities and global interest in new art from a rising China, which brought this site into capitalist supply lines, international galleries were able to translate that art into capitalist assets, thus allowing accumulation (Tsing 2015: 301).

Uncontained Precariousness

Since about 2011, with the end of Hu Jiebao’s tenure as Songzhuang party secretary, the condition of many artists, galleries, and art institutions in Songzhuang

has significantly deteriorated. In that year, the new party secretary, Li Xia, vowed to continue the development of Songzhuang into a creative industry cluster in a way that would emphasise culture and industry equally (Sina 2011). What followed in 2013–14 was the first wave of forced expulsions of artists from Songzhuang and the large-scale demolition of studios, homes, and even galleries and exhibition halls in various parts of the town. The demolitions damaged and scattered a community already hit by the impact of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–09 on the art market. The reason given by the authorities for the demolitions was that these buildings stood on land that was still designated for agricultural use and were therefore illegal, as was the artists’ purchase of housing permits.

Local artists dismissed these reasons as insufficient to justify the sudden demolitions, and some protested the evictions. They reasoned that the value of real estate in Songzhuang had risen thanks to the development of the art scene and the new local leadership was eager to redevelop the town—just as Wang Chunchen had witnessed only a few years earlier in Chaoyang District. Rumours circulated as

to whose studio would be demolished next; at one point, even the home of Li Xianting was said to be at risk. Extensive redevelopment plans fuelled a rise in rents. Artists who had not been evicted made plans to leave as a sense of precarity and decline spread. Hu Jiebao himself—who still chaired the Songzhuang Art Promotion Association—reportedly criticised the *modus operandi* of the local authorities, but to no avail (Wu and Song 2013).

That feeling of precariousness and rising rents have been increasing further since 2015, when the Beijing municipality revealed plans to turn areas of Tongzhou District adjacent to Songzhuang into a subcentral administrative centre, which will involve the relocation of several agencies of the municipal government and hundreds of thousands of workers with them. Today those areas are characterised by half-empty skyscrapers and high-rise apartment buildings. Songzhuang, however, because it stands on the sandy soil of the ancient course of the Chaobai River, is said to be unsuitable for such structures.

The predicament of post-2011 Songzhuang reflects what it means to experience precariousness in contemporary China, particularly with reference to the issue of expulsion and the limitation of citizens' rights—a question explored through a range of cultural phenomena by Margaret Hillenbrand in *On the Edge* (2023). As the case of Songzhuang shows, the risk of seeing one's rights and belonging stripped away (Hillenbrand 2023: 20) is not limited to wage labour and specific social cohorts. In this case, it affects self-employed artists and art professionals who had elected to maintain a modicum of independence from the cultural establishment and who had hitherto been pivotal to the legacy project of the local party leadership. They, too, share in the condition of 'civic zombiehood', which, as Hillenbrand explains, 'symbolises the fear—the fact—that no-one is safe from harm in a system where both the spirit and the letter of the law are applied inconsistently' (Pia et al. 2024: 227).

A striking example of such 'uncontained' precariousness was the forced eviction in 2017 of Shen Jingdong, an artist who had moved to Beijing in 2004 and settled in Songzhuang in 2009. Originally from Nanjing and active in the avant-garde scene since the late 1990s, Shen's art had already achieved critical and commercial success and was collected by the National Art Museum of China. On the morning of 29

March 2017, Shen posted on WeChat that his house and studio in Songzhuang were being demolished without any prior notice and asked his friends to come out and protest the demolition with him. As Shen and other Songzhuang artists did so, they were thrown to the ground by private security guards and some were injured. A photo taken by a bystander shows Shen and another protester being pinned to the ground with anti-riot forks—a ubiquitous policing tool in today's Beijing (Artron 2017). Shen has since relocated his studio to Yanjiao and created artworks that comment on that experience (see Kim 2020: 26–31).

It is clear that one factor behind the precarious condition of Songzhuang's art community is the personalised nature of the project that propelled its growth. Nonetheless, since Hu Jiebao stepped down from his position and a new leadership took over, what Songzhuang has experienced can hardly be described as the consequences of a policy reversal, but rather reflects the authorities' change in attitude towards contemporary art. The party leadership in Songzhuang still appears to be pursuing the development of the town into a creative industry cluster—just one in which they see the presence of a vibrant community of contemporary artists as unessential and maybe even undesirable.

Paradoxically, it appears that the new leadership's implementation of national policies and harnessing of copious funding for the development of China's creative industries may be contributing to the decline of contemporary art in Songzhuang. For instance, in a 2013 article entitled 'Nightmare Songzhuang', Li Xianting described how the Songzhuang Art Festival, which had enjoyed the support of the local authorities for seven years, was replaced in 2012 with a 'China Songzhuang Art Industry Expo' that involved massive investment in urban redevelopment projects. At the event, Li wrote, 'security was tight and the atmosphere unprecedentedly tense'. In addition, the main exhibition during the event consisted entirely of expensive 'traditional' art, with no contemporary works.

It may be added that the forced demolitions and expulsions, as well as the relocations caused by rising rents, generate insecurity while pruning social ties within the community, thus reducing the potential for solidarity among local artists—something the authorities may consider an added benefit. Finally, those who settled in Songzhuang earlier are said to be relatively

less at risk of being evicted than newcomers. As the rumour about the eviction of Li Xianting shows, however, no-one can be said to be entirely outside the condition of precariousness that newcomer, poorer, and younger artists experience most acutely.

The Ruins of Art

The decline of the art community and collapsing support for contemporary art in Songzhuang also affect the built environment. Not only have ruins been obsessively represented and utilised in contemporary Chinese art, but the ruins of art—such as demolished art studios and academies, ruins in which artists settled, and ruins from which artists were evicted—occupy an important place in the history of contemporary Chinese art (Strafella and Berg 2023: 296–97). Songzhuang's decline risks adding new examples to that illustrious lineage of artistic ruins.

Alongside vacant galleries and condemned studios, art institutions are also at risk of accelerated decay. An especially worrying example is the Songzhuang Contemporary Art Archive (SCAA), a non-profit institution dedicated to the study and documentation of contemporary Chinese art that includes an archive with materials from approximately 100 artists, a library, exhibition spaces, and a publishing house. Its academic advisors include such prominent figures as Guan Yuda, Jia Fangzhou, and Wang Chunchen, while Wu Hong served as its inaugural curator. The creation of the SCAA started in 2011 with the backing of Hu Jiebao and the support of artists such as Fang Lijun and Wang Guangyi, but the stylish building that houses it was completed only in 2015.

Due to lack of funding for repairs and maintenance, several rooms of the building are already suffering from water damage, part of the external cladding has fallen off, and some areas are not safe to access. The central courtyard, which had been paved with bricks of unsuitable quality, crumbles under the feet of visitors. As of 2024, most of the original curatorial staff has left the SCAA. Among the few art-related businesses that seem to be thriving in Songzhuang are schools that prepare art students to sit the entrance exams of state-run academies. During one of my visits, the archive's exhibition area was being rented out to one such school and displayed the type of stale

academic paintings that students must emulate to succeed in those tests—resulting in a disheartening contrast with the original mission of this institution.

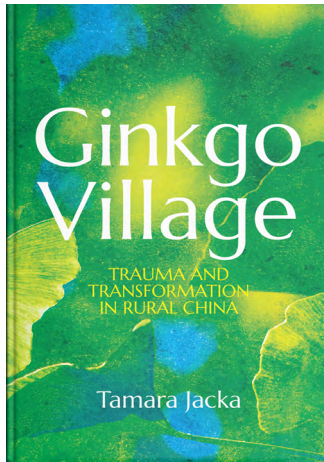
It must be mentioned that travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic, declining interest among foreign collectors in contemporary Chinese art, and the deterioration of diplomatic relations between Beijing and some Euro-American capitals have also negatively affected art galleries and institutions in Songzhuang and elsewhere in China.

Not an Epilogue

In spite of the decline and transformation experienced by Songzhuang during the past decade, it may be too early to announce the demise of the 'grassroots' dimension of contemporary art in Songzhuang. I can attest that ambitious art students still move from far-away provinces to Beijing and establish their studios in modest rural homes on the outskirts of this town. New galleries were established by young curators even during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Chinese masters of contemporary art still live and make art in Songzhuang, while some up-and-coming contemporary artists have built a successful career from their studios in Xiaopu Village. The uncertainty looming over the question of how long this will last is the measure of the precariousness in which they all partake to some degree.

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CONVERSATIONS



Ginkgo Village: Trauma and Transformation (ANU Press, 2024).

Ginkgo Village

A Conversation with Tamara Jacka

Nicholas LOUBERE, Tamara JACKA

In *Ginkgo Village: Trauma and Transformation* (ANU Press, 2024), Tamara Jacka takes readers deep into a village in central-eastern China. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Ginkgo villagers experienced terrible trauma and far-reaching socioeconomic and political change. At the heart of this book are eight tales that draw on ethnographic and life-history research to re-create Ginkgo Village life and the interactions between the villagers and the researchers who visit them. These tales use storytelling to engender an empathetic understanding of Chinese villagers' often traumatic life experiences, to present concrete details of transformations in everyday village life in an engaging manner, and to explore the challenges and rewards of fieldwork research that attempts empathetic understanding across cultures.

Nicholas Loubere: The writing style and format of this book represent a departure from the traditional academic research monograph. You provide a detailed historical and contextualised background to Ginkgo Village, but the bulk of the book is a collection of fictionalised stories. Can you discuss the choices you made when deciding to adopt this unusual approach? What different kinds of political or ethical considerations did you wrestle with compared with the more traditional academic writing you have done in the past? And how do you envision this book contributing to knowledge production differently than other academic monographs, including your own previous works?

Tamara Jacka: Thanks for this question. I appreciate it because I believe there are political and ethical issues at play in every choice of writing style and format, and every writing style and format has political and ethical effects. Over the decades, several feminists, interpretivists, and other social theorists have drawn attention to this, but it's not a big consideration in the social sciences today. There are very powerful conventions for social science writing that most people adhere to without much thought: we use technical jargon and formal language; avoid emotive language and keep ourselves out of our writing; pretend to be objective and impartial; and analyse, explain, and develop arguments using 'facts' and 'evidence'. We don't tell stories. We don't make things up.

That's a caricature, but readers will recognise a general trend and will be familiar with the institutional pressures to conform with this trend. Put simply, it's hard to receive jobs and grants, get published, and be accepted as a serious social scientist if you flout or challenge the conventions I've outlined here. But in *Ginkgo Village*, that's precisely what I've tried to do.

Here I want to pause to highlight what it is about the writing in *Ginkgo Village* that's so different from other, more conventional academic research monographs, including my own previous works. In your question, you highlight fictionalisation, but I'm going to put this last and discuss it separately, because it has been less central to the achievement of my main aims than some other features of the writing in this book.

To my mind, the most distinctive and important features of the writing in *Ginkgo Village* are a language that is personal, direct, and informal; a storytelling mode; the inclusion of the researcher/author as a character in the story; and the use of memoir and personal reflection. My aim in adopting these distinctive features has been to achieve an effect very different from that of more conventional writing in the social sciences.

To explain, I'd like to draw on a spatial metaphor: all the conventions I outlined have the effect of maintaining a gap between the researcher/writer and the 'objects' of research and writing, and between the writer and the reader. In contrast, the most distinctive features of my writing in *Ginkgo Village* are aimed at reducing those gaps. I have deliberately chosen them to make what I consider to be political interventions in the production of knowledge.

First, I've tried to close the gap between the researcher/writer and the reader by making my writing more engaging and accessible. Most social science writing is inaccessible to people outside a narrow field of academia, the effect of which is to reinforce the elitism of knowledge production. I want to work against this, to strive for what I believe should be the goal of any scholar: broad public education and empowerment through the cultivation of skills in creative and critical thinking and knowledge production. I see engaging, accessible language and stories as a contribution to achieving that goal.

I've also tried to close the gap between the researcher/writer and the reader—many of whom will also be researchers or aspiring researchers—by revealing details about the experience of conducting fieldwork in rural China. Most fieldwork-based research writing tells the reader little about the researcher and their background or about the researcher's personal experiences and relationships with people in the field. Whether intended or not, the effect is, first, to ill prepare junior researchers for the reality of fieldwork research.

This type of writing also reinforces the notion that a researcher can and should maintain distance between themselves and whom or what they are researching. They should be impartial and objective and not become emotionally entangled with the 'objects' of their research, and their personal background, experiences, and relationships in and outside the field are irrelevant to the research findings and how they are interpreted.

Many social theorists—especially feminists, critical anthropologists, and those taking an interpretivist approach—have written at length about what nonsense this is, yet this way of writing, this highly problematic form of knowledge production, persists. As a new approach to the problem, I have used memoir and stories in which I, the researcher/writer, and my research assistant are protagonists.

The reason I have taken this new approach can be summed up in the injunction to creative writers to ‘show not tell’. You can waste a lot of ink trying to write an academic article or book that tells readers what is wrong with the impartial, objective researcher model and the supposed dichotomy between researcher and researched without really getting them to appreciate how far removed it is from reality. But with a well-written story that shows rather than tells, you can draw readers into your work far more effectively and enable them to really feel and appreciate for themselves what you are trying to say. That is what I have aimed for in this book.

The third motivation underpinning the most distinctive features of this book, especially its storytelling mode, is the wish to overcome the gap between readers and the villagers I have researched and written about. My aim has been to complicate or get past the headlines and stereotypes of China as an evil authoritarian state, to overcome the perception of a divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and to build empathy.

Empathy is a key theme in the book. I define it as ‘a first-person-like visceral, emotional and cognitive understanding of others’ subjective experiences, underpinned by respect and care for their wellbeing’ (p. 8). As I discuss in the Introduction to *Ginkgo Village*, achieving empathy is a demanding process, which takes a great deal of hard work and learning and involves overcoming numerous challenges. Many of the stories in this book explore those challenges and illustrate how difficult they are to overcome. At the same time, though, I argue that attempts to build empathy across political, social, and cultural divides are vital. As has been demonstrated in particularly stark fashion in recent years, political leaders use divisive rhetoric, full of misinformation and prejudice, to try to promote violent regional and global conflicts. Building empathy between peoples can help counter these efforts. That is my aim with this book.

Storytelling is crucial to achieving this aim. Well-written stories are empathy-building machines. They are effective as stories precisely because they collapse the distance between the reader and the text, enabling readers to imaginatively inhabit characters’ life-worlds and imagine and feel what it would be like to be in those characters’ shoes.

Again, the ‘show not tell’ injunction is crucial here. To enable readers to inhabit characters’ life-worlds, I must provide a wealth of detail about things that in most social science writing would be considered trivial and irrelevant. This includes details about the weather and landscape, individuals’ mannerisms and body language, their clothing, and the type of housing in which they live.

This brings me to the issue of fictionalisation and the use of composite characters. These are features of the book that I chose primarily for ethical reasons, to protect residents of Ginkgo Village from identification and the harms that could potentially flow from it. I didn’t want villagers or village leaders to get into trouble because of revelations of official corruption, for example. Nor did I want to exacerbate tensions within families by revealing family members’ identities and writing about the conflicts between them. Most ethnographers get around this problem

by using pseudonyms. But because I had adopted a storytelling mode, which, as I have suggested, requires a lot of detailed information about individuals as well as their life-worlds, pseudonyms were not sufficient. I had to fabricate far more to make the stories engaging, while also protecting Ginkgo Villagers from harm.

I suspect that my use of fictionalisation will cause conniptions among some social scientists who look for facts and figures as evidence that the writer/researcher is ‘telling the truth’ and describing and explaining a reality separate from and unaffected by the writer/researcher’s own identity and interpretations.

In response, I stress that facts and figures cannot remove the inevitable influence of the writer/researcher and their interpretations on the research findings. But I’d also like to point to several features of the book that should allay concerns about the validity of the knowledge it imparts. These include a detailed description (in the Appendix) of the research on which my stories are based and of the relationship in the book between fact and fiction; and an explicit discussion (in the Introduction) of issues relating to interpretation.

NL: Something that came across quite forcefully when reading the book was the starkness of power inequalities in rural Chinese interpersonal relations throughout history: the subjugation of those within the same community, and even the same household, in often violent ways. Obviously, this is not unique to rural China, and we see these dynamics at play throughout the world and across human history, but it is something that has affected many of us who have spent time trying to understand the historical transformation of rural Chinese society. Do you think these dynamics are a function of the past or do they still exist in the ways in which rural China is organised today?

TJ: Power inequalities in rural China are definitely not just a thing of the past. But, over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there have been numerous shifts in the patterns of power inequalities that villagers experience. For example, decollectivisation and the return to family farming reduced village cadres’ power over production decision-making. But at the same time, the imposition of the One-Child Policy involved an increase in village cadres’ exercise of coercive control over villagers’ reproductive lives.

When it comes to intrafamily power inequalities, the picture is also complex. During the Maoist era, collectivisation moved power over production decision-making from senior men within the family to senior men outside the family. With decollectivisation in the post-Mao period, much of that power was restored to senior men within families. Then, with new opportunities for labour outmigration, came opportunities for younger women to improve their personal incomes, and this enabled them to improve their bargaining power within their families. But the improvements have been limited, partly because men’s waged labour is generally remunerated at a higher rate than women’s, and partly because the norm has been for either mothers or grandmothers, but not fathers, to withdraw from paid employment to raise children.

Meanwhile, my sense is that overall the power and status of *older* village women, relative to other family members, declined through both the Maoist and the post-Mao eras. The outmigration of younger members of the family exacerbated that trend, with most older villagers having little say in their offspring's decisions to migrate and leave grandchildren in their care, even though these decisions frequently result in huge financial burdens and workloads for older left-behind family members, especially women.

There is one aspect or consequence of intrafamily rural power inequalities, domestic violence, about which relatively little research has been conducted. So, it's hard to say whether its incidence has increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the decades. However, the numerous stories I've heard about domestic violence have led me to believe that it's very prevalent in rural China today. It's probably no more prevalent than in the past, though, and probably no more prevalent than in urban China or anywhere else in the world.

NL: A constant undercurrent running through this book, and one that has been a primary focus of your research for much of your career, is the fundamental importance of labour migration as a driver of transformation in rural China. As you point out, the migration patterns in Xin County are unique due to larger quotas for overseas labour migration. Nevertheless, it also feels like much of the rural experience that you describe in the book is relatable across much of rural China. Can you reflect on some of the key migration-induced transformations that you have explored in this book? How has migration shifted the fabric of social life in places like Ginkgo Village?

TJ: Yes, labour migration has been a key driver of social transformation, especially in poorer rural areas in inland China, where local industrialisation has been minimal. In these areas, which have been the focus of my research, most young and middle-aged people have left the village in search of waged employment. As I outline in Chapter One of *Ginkgo Village*, this has had a profound impact on the social fabric of the village.

First, migrant earnings have greatly boosted some villagers' disposable incomes, and this has contributed to new desires and social expectations for consumption. At the same time, variations in villagers' abilities to lift their incomes through outmigration have led to much greater inequalities. Within the village, the extent of these inequalities is less obvious, simply because the wealthiest have permanently moved away. But even among those remaining in the village, inequalities have increased between better-off households with access to migrant earnings and income from agriculture and poorer households with less access to both migrant earnings and agricultural income. The former build large new houses, with amenities like running water and flush toilets, and buy appliances like smartphones, smart TVs, and cars. At the other end of the scale, the most disadvantaged group includes households of the sick and the elderly who receive little or no financial assistance from migrant family members and live in appalling conditions. In between, many middle-aged and older women and couples left behind in the village subsidise their adult migrant children by caring for and

covering the costs of sick family members, their ageing parents, and their grandchildren. This burden affects their workloads and health as well as their incomes, consumption, and living standards.

Second and relatedly, the removal of young people from the village labour force has resulted in shifts in the work patterns of the left-behind. Most importantly, large numbers of middle-aged and older villagers, burdened with child care on top of agricultural production, have stopped growing rice because it is too labour intensive. This withdrawal from rice-growing has spurred two further shifts: a decline in animal husbandry and the merging of numerous smallholdings into large tracts of land controlled by businesspeople, often from outside the village, who employ local middle-aged villagers as agricultural wage labourers.

Third, rural outmigration and the associated increased incomes and mobility of young people have had important effects on family living arrangements and intrafamily relationships. Two important trends have emerged: on the one hand, many young married couples are leaving the older generation earlier than they would have previously and are living further apart from them. This includes couples who met while working as migrant labourers who decide to remain living in the city where they met. On the other hand, young women's need for childcare assistance has led to a range of previously unusual household arrangements. For example, many older village women move back and forth between the village where one or more married sons or daughters and their families live and a nearby town and/or distant city where other adult children's families live.

To some extent, increasing physical distance between family members and kin has also weakened kinship ties and has had a negative effect on the intergenerational transmission of village culture and norms. It isn't just labour migration that has had this effect. Kinship ties and cultural transmission have also been affected by increasing levels of schooling, which have pulled youngsters away from the village into urban boarding schools, technical colleges, and universities.

This greater physical distance between the generations means that older folk have less chance to pass on knowledge relating, for example, to foraging and the customary rules associated with weddings, funerals, New Year, and other rituals. To some extent, this has been offset by the return of most labour migrants to the village every New Year and by the advent of new forms of communication, especially smartphones. In the future, though, I suspect that foraging will die out as will local knowledge about key rituals. Key wedding and funeral rituals will continue, but they will be conducted more frequently by employed professionals.

The impact of physical distance on kinship ties is likely to continue to be less marked, at least in the near future: migrants' reliance on family members for child care and the ongoing socioeconomic significance of *guanxi* ('connections'), combined with migrants' annual return to the village at New Year and their use of social media and smartphones, mean that intrafamily and kinship ties are likely to remain key to villagers' and migrants' lives.

NL: The history of Xin County that you outline in the book is one marked by poverty and extreme hardship. Even as incomes have increased in the post-reform era, you illuminate some stark inequalities. At the same time, the modern Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims much of its political legitimacy from rural poverty-alleviation efforts, even going so far as to declare the end of extreme poverty in the country. If we think about contemporary Ginkgo Village and Xin County in the context of their histories and the ways in which rural places and people have been subordinated to urbanisation and industrialisation, do you think their place in the political economy of China has really changed? What role will places like Ginkgo Village play in the broader project of modern China going forward?

TJ: That's a good question. At the most fundamental level, I don't believe that the place of the countryside and the rural population in China's political economy has changed significantly since the CCP came to power in 1949. Despite all the Maoist rhetoric about overcoming rural-urban and class inequalities, and all the post-Mao rhetoric about alleviating poverty, rural places and people remain disadvantaged and marginalised, essentially because they have been key to capital accumulation via the exploitation of cheap labour and the extraction of agricultural goods. From the 1950s until the early 2020s, that basic role in the political economy has not changed, at least with respect to the poorer inland areas and populations. However, the mechanisms through which exploitation and extraction occur have shifted. In recent years, there have also been shifts in the relative importance for capital accumulation of exploitation and extraction from different parts of rural China.

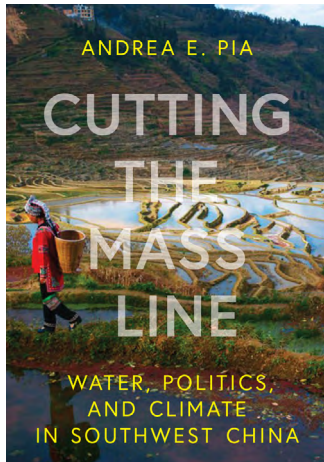
In brief: during the Maoist era, collectivisation and the enforced state appropriation of a very large proportion of agricultural produce were the mechanisms through which capital accumulation was achieved.

During the post-Mao period, especially since the 1990s, capital accumulation has occurred through rural labour outmigration. Exploitation of both the rural migrants themselves and their family members left in the countryside has been crucial. Low migrant wages and minimal provision of welfare to migrant workers boost the profits of capitalist enterprises. And these low wages are made possible because migrants and the businesses who employ them are subsidised by family members back in the villages and towns who take charge of social reproduction. Family members bear most of the costs of caring for the sick, the elderly, and the very young, and they also maintain a foothold in agricultural production, so they're able to keep themselves fed, while also contributing to food security for the rest of the population.

In the twenty-first century, though, growing rural incomes, industrialisation, and urbanisation have reduced the pool of rural migrants and family members willing to be exploited in this fashion, especially in the more economically developed regions close to cities and on the eastern seaboard. The state and businesses have adopted a few strategies to try to offset this trend. Multinational businesses in search of cheaper labour have shifted into inland China and overseas to places like Vietnam and Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, the state has sought to shift from a model of economic growth fuelled by the exploitation of cheap rural labour in production combined with export and overseas consumption,

to one that relies more heavily on rural as well as urban consumption. This has involved attempts to alleviate rural poverty and improve rural welfare and consumption power through the abolition of agricultural taxes and education fees, the provision of medical insurance and old-age pensions, and other poverty-alleviation measures. At the same time, the state has also tried to improve food security and lessen its reliance on food imports by subsidising the development of large-scale, mechanised agricultural production.

We have yet to see how, in China's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, strategies for capital accumulation will evolve. But my sense is that the pre-Covid trends will continue. In some parts of the countryside, capital accumulation will occur through large-scale mechanised agricultural production and through rural as well as urban consumption. The importance of rural labour migration as a strategy for capital accumulation will decline overall, but not disappear entirely. Many poorer rural families will contribute to capital accumulation through the dual exploitation of migrant labour in production and their family members' labour in social reproduction. These families will remain disadvantaged and marginalised. ■



Cutting the Mass Line: Water, Politics, and Climate in Southwest China (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024).

Cutting the Mass Line

A Conversation with Andrea E. Pia

Loretta Ieng-tak LOU, Andrea E. PIA

China is experiencing climate whiplash: extreme fluctuations between drought and flooding that threaten the health and autonomy of millions of people. Set against mounting anxiety over the future of global water supplies, Andrea E. Pia's *Cutting the Mass Line: Water, Politics, and Climate in Southwest China* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024) investigates the enduring political, technical, and ethical project of making water available to human communities and ecosystems in a time of drought, infrastructural disrepair, and environmental breakdown. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, archival materials, and statistical data, Pia brings readers into the inner workings of China's complex water supply ecosystem and demonstrates how citizens' efforts to keep access to local water sources and flourish in their communities redraw the political possibilities of climate and environmental collective action in unforeseen directions.

Loretta Lou: I am fascinated by your use of 'lines' as an analytical anchor, both literally and metaphorically, to analyse the multifaceted ways communities engage with water resources and environmental challenges. How did this idea come to you? Was there a Eureka moment?

Andrea E. Pia: As I explain in the introduction, this book is an odd object. It is the product of many years of fieldwork spent working side by side with Chinese water officials stationed in a drought-affected area in the southwest of the country coupled with years of activism on the decommodification and re-municipalisation of water services in my home region—a similarly climate-endangered area of northwest Italy. Unlike the scaremongering prevalent in much of the mainstream coverage of climate change and its impact on the global water cycle (acidification of seas, aridification of land, prolonged droughts alternating with apocalyptic floods, and ensuing mass migration), I wanted the book to offer a less hyperbolic account of the experiences of the people most affected. What do people already massively impacted by extreme oscillations of freshwater availability do to adapt to this 'new water normal' and how do they think about the socio-environmental change they witness? What can we learn from them as scholars, activists, workers, and inhabitants of a planet with a runaway climate, when the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere currently stands at 421 parts per million and counting?

I said the book is odd; it is also a study in political escapism. How can we—Chinese and Italians alike—escape the ecological cul-de-sac created by the energy history of the colonial North? How can we ensure

A line of Yi and Han farmers waits for an emergency freshwater delivery. Source: Andrea E. Pia.



that most of the world's population has access to safe and reliable freshwater while maintaining an economic system that systematically extracts, degrades, and discards natural resources and pollutes air and water? This system imperils the livelihoods of current and future humans and non-humans.

I discovered that, especially among the water engineers and bureaucrats with whom I worked, thinking in terms of *lines* helped them address this question. Technically speaking, *lines* are useful for tracing water movement topographically and determining safety thresholds for service delivery—for instance, how pure water must be to be released from a water purification station back into the environment and how much groundwater can be extracted without impacting recharge rates? But discursively, *lines* also helped my interlocutors defer criticism (by periodically adjusting water efficiency benchmarks, for instance) while also envisioning new delivery workarounds that could balance efficiency with equity in distribution (for instance, by demonstrating the need for emergency water delivery in villages where estimated per capita water intake had suddenly dropped below a minimum quantity).

So, in the book, I think about *lines* alongside my interlocutors, but I try to do so in ways that can constructively expand or undermine their thinking. That is, more than a Eureka moment, when dealing with the mental gymnastics inaugurated by *lines*, I experienced countless Galileo moments (not being taken seriously). I spent most of my fieldwork insisting to my interlocutors that (water) sustainability shouldn't only be seen—as they preferred to do—asymptotically or, in other words, as an indefinite linear progression towards a supposedly balanced state between economic and hydrological needs. In my view, sustainability

is also about the *fault lines* created by this very logic: What is fresh-water used for? Who gets more and who less? Which communities and places are prioritised and which are deprioritised in delivery? Who will shoulder the weight of the ‘new water normal’ and who will not?

In a way, this approach means retooling *lines* as a method for considering water and climate justice. There are principles, or lines, that one is unwilling to cross and others that one is willing to defend with one’s body. The practice and history of Italian water activism helped me considerably here. It not only helped me engineer for my interlocutors a new horizon for a notion of sustainability that could also be seen as just; it also helped me maintain a Galilean optimism in this effort. Despite my interlocutors’ stubborn defence of their hydro-social world view, I kept faith in the goodness of my interpretation. The book shows how this attitude ultimately paid off, ethnographically speaking.

LL: It is interesting that, as a scholar-activist project, you were hosted mainly by the Water Service Office (水务所). We understand that this kind of arrangement is very common and expected in China. How did you navigate the different power structures and relationships as a scholar-activist in this dynamic? You mentioned that you were not afraid of ‘quarrelling or openly disagreeing’ with your interlocutors. I am sure you were not! Tell us some interesting stories about this.

AEP: A Water Service Office (WSO) is the lowest administrative echelon in a multilayered, intersecting, and sometimes fragmented bureaucracy that supervises the allocation, distribution, and use of freshwater in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In 2018, some of the environmental policy functions proper to the Ministry of Water Resources (水利部) were transferred to the newly created Ministry of Ecology and Environment (生态环境部), including responsibility for water function zoning and watershed protection. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the WSO was still primarily responsible for the domestic and agricultural use of freshwater for an inter-ethnic community of about 100,000 people on the Yunnan–Guizhou Plateau—one of 26 similar offices in the area.

I would not say that my stay in the WSO was expected or common, nor that the excellent hospitality I received from my host officials was foregone or unremarkable. As is common in anthropology, the fieldwork described in the book was the result of extremely fortuitous combinations of circumstances that, for reasons I will explain in a moment, would not be immediately replicable in today’s China. For a start, by the time I arrived in Yunnan (in 2011), I had already spent several years in the PRC, first as a Chinese-language student and then as a trainee at the Italian Embassy in Beijing. I had already done fieldwork on water shortages and environmental displacement in the north of the country and received a Chinese Scholarship Council scholarship to be a visiting student in a well-known university, where one of the most prestigious water studies departments in the country is located.

When I arrived in Yunnan, I already had the research experience and contacts that allowed me to be introduced to some high-profile officials of the relevant county seat. I am not entirely sure whether it was my project—at the time mostly about Water Users' Associations—my Chinese sponsor, my British connections, or my second-tier European citizenship, and gender (and whiteness) that made me strike a chord with the rural water manager who later became a key interlocutor and my gatekeeper in the WSO. Needless to say, officials also saw potential in the applications of the findings of my research, especially as a way of evaluating the evolving policy landscape of water resource provision, which was seeing the introduction of new actors and responsibilities. Regardless, to describe the serendipitous journey into their office: after some time, water officials started talking about 'destiny' (缘分) and how, given the many bureaucratic odds I had apparently overcome, our meeting was somewhat 'fated' and 'meant to be'.

As one should, I took these comments very seriously and understood them to refer to a type of relationship that is supposed to be enriching at both ends precisely because it is unexpected and against the odds. Because of this, I often took the liberty to tease and provoke my interlocutors—always in good faith—when we openly disagreed about something. Keep in mind that the water officials would see me every day, working in their office, eating the same food, driving with them to distant remote villages, and working manually on water infrastructure for months on end. And we disagreed on so many aspects of their work! I mentioned that this was an inter-ethnic area. At the time of my fieldwork, it was also one of the poorest in Yunnan, which in turn was one of the least developed provinces in China. Water development plans adversely impacted ethnic minorities, especially Yi, Miao, and Hui people. I often brought up this problematic racialisation of water services with my Han interlocutors, who took offence and often argued back, as you see in the book.

These confrontational dialogues happened at the beginning of President Xi Jinping's tenure. I witnessed at first hand how the WSO's vibrant office atmosphere changed after the government's anticorruption measures. I must say that some of my interlocutors ended up being demoted or removed from office for reasons that sometimes made me wonder about their ultimate motivation or my indirect involvement. Mindi Schneider, the late Elizabeth Lord, and Jessica Wilczak (2021) are right when they argue that fieldwork in China, especially among officials, has always been riddled with unspoken compromises, some of them violent and morally debasing, and that the future may have in store even more compromising arrangements, especially for fieldworkers (see also Alpermann 2022).

Surely, the conversation I had once with a high-profile water official during an alcohol-fuelled banquet would hardly be replicable today. Referring to my presence there, he started off by comparing contemporary China to the Tang Dynasty for its openness and multiplicity of people. I argued that, under the Tang Dynasty, women had a better chance of holding positions of power, as evidenced by Empress Wu

Assessment and measurement of high-altitude canal lining infrastructure. Source: Andrea E. Pia.



Zetian. However, I also agreed that the PRC was entering a Tang-style religious persecution moment. I mentioned that what was happening in Tibet and Xinjiang reminded me of the Huichang persecution of Buddhism. Surprisingly, my interlocutor laughed at my (in fact, limited) knowledge of Chinese history, praised me in front of the whole table, and invited me over for more late-night drinks and company at his private home.

LL: As you explained, the ‘mass line’ (群众路线) originally referred to Mao Zedong’s political principle of working closely with the people. ‘Cutting the Mass Line’, I presume, could be read as a description of the Chinese Government’s alienation from the public and their participation, or as a critique of the version of sustainability promoted by state and market actors?

AEP: I appropriate the term ‘cutting the mass line’ (为群众开路线吧) from a joke once made by a key research participant as they were attempting to sabotage a waterpipe. It is my way of relating an attitude or a posture I detected across the Yunnan–Guizhou Plateau. I consider this attitude to have important political implications for the PRC, as well as for environmental activism more generally. To the uninitiated, the *mass line* is a long-abandoned Maoist principle that instructed party officials to consult the masses, interpret their will, and implement policies in their interests (Lin 2018: 121). The point I am trying to make by referring to a line or connection (hydraulic and political at the same time) being severed is that at certain nodes or junctures of the sociopolitical edifice the PRC has built in the past four decades, and especially after the opening-up reforms, there is a desire for change. Moreover, there is a demand for power that has been left unaddressed and under-elaborated by citizens and professional observers of China for too long.

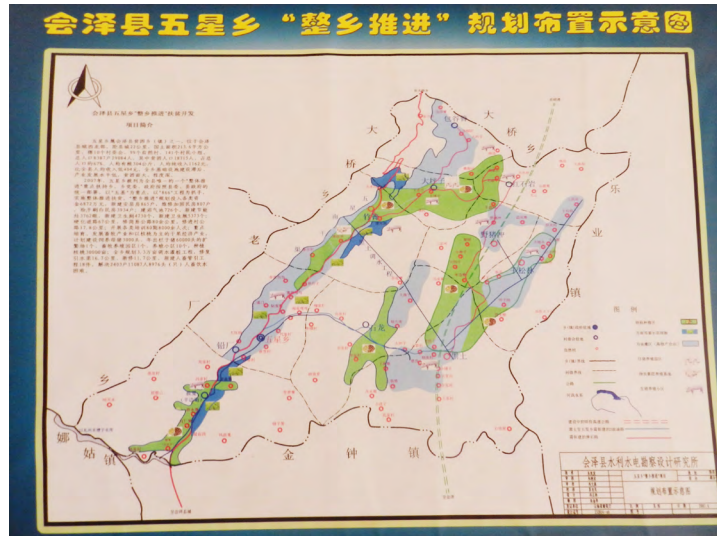
The empirical material in the book suggests that while several decades of political and economic deprioritising (and police repression) of peripheral rural communities in China have considerably drained the political imagination and practices of mobilisation and resistance in the countryside, they have not been able to quench the thirst for autonomy, self-direction, and self-government that has been one of the driving forces behind agrarian unrest in the country (see Bianco 2001). Freshwater access is a fantastically effective vehicle for the formulation of these demands as it conjoins the ‘crisis of survival with the social justice question of how we want to live’, as Priscilla Wald (quoted in Iovino 2016: 143) once put it.

More importantly, on the plateau, a new vocabulary of power, autonomy, and resistance is emerging—one that directly contends with the imposed language of *gratitude* (Sorace 2020) to which the PRC resorts every time a new ‘rural revitalisation’ reform is implemented and more pro-capital, disempowering economic centralist policies are introduced. In the book, I speak of this language as Promethean, latent, a work-in-progress. For all intents and purposes, this language is an artefact of the fieldwork encounter, a by-product of how my interlocutors and I were pushing each other in interpreting the changes brought about by prolonged drought and ‘climate arson’ as carrying a political valence of some kind. Theorising from this space demanded of me that I return the mercuriality of this evolving disposition towards power to something that could be drawn on by grassroots mobilisations happening elsewhere. In addition, with so much talk of ‘political depression’ (政治性抑郁) on Chinese social media (Bandurski 2022), I hope the book offers an empirically grounded, yet inspiring rejoinder to pervasive youth dissatisfaction in the country.

I have spoken above about sustainability but allow me to restate that the version of sustainability we have learned to know and confide in—call it system-preserving sustainability or status-quo sustainability—has now reached the status of a generalised, defiant feature of modernity. It is how today a great many people make the experience of the economic system in which they live and act. *Cutting the Mass Line* aspires to ignite the imaginations of those not necessarily familiar with present-day Chinese society, or Maoist thought, for that matter, but similarly troubled and angered by this state of affairs: that a savvy principle of cohabitation and mutual nourishment has mutated into an engine of differential distribution of wealth and opportunities across the globe.

For those living in the countryside pre-emptively abandoned by system-preserving sustainability, it is the work of ‘ecological survivability’ that ought to take precedence—ensuring the continuation of their communities and environments one day at a time. It is this shortened horizon, with its many arrested lines, that I tried to repair and extend with my book.

A planimetric representation of a river system's linear network.
Source: Andrea E. Pia.



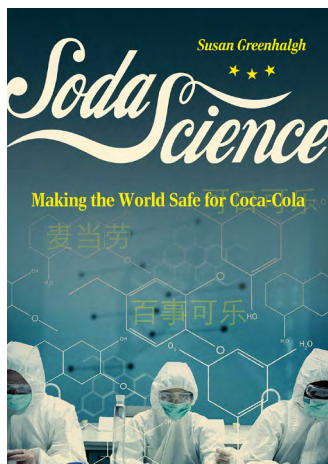
LL: What are some of the common themes you observed in grassroots Chinese environmentalism? What are some of the unique features of the water activism you witnessed in your field site? In my study of green living in Hong Kong, I found the term ‘prefigurative politics’ inadequate to capture its full spirit, even though green living is indeed a form of prefigurative activism. Does this resonate with you?

AEP: Limiting myself to the recent history of the environmental movement in the Global North, prefigurative politics, as a core principle of organisation for social movements, has waxed and waned over the horizon of what is politically permissible in the interim period between the Seattle protests and Tahrir Square (see Malm 2014).

I now work with young Fridays for Future campaigners and Climate Justice activists in Europe and Southeast Asia. For them, what is really at stake is not demonstrating in practice what a post-carbon, postcolonial society would look like but making visible the horrific fact that *society as we know it* may collapse if runaway climate change remains unaddressed. In so doing, they face a new kind of systemic repression that targets not only their ability to ‘prefigure’ with their activism an alternative state of affairs (such as speaking out against the fossil fuel industry by joining renewable energy communities) but also their very ability to *figure out* the mechanisms that make business as usual tick. That is, they are prevented from bringing greater light to the connivance between continuous infrastructural expansion, state-imposed hyper-consumerism, and the dictatorship of financial capital lying at the core of the climate predicament. In the United Kingdom, from where I write, Just Stop Oil campaigners have been given up to five years’ imprisonment for disrupting traffic by having protesters climb on to gantries over the motorway for four successive days. Let me repeat: five years for climbing over a motorway.

One could argue that both ways of thinking about prefiguration—between David Graeber and Joel Kovel, let's say—are under attack in the West but were never an option in an authoritarian polity such as the PRC. Contrary to this view, in my book, I revisit the 2011 Wukan uprising in rural Guangdong (Chuang 2016) and show how it could be read as an instance of prefigurative agrarian politics. But, by and large, I agree that the grammar and practice of global environmentalism do not have a linear genealogy or a continuous geography. One thing that I always found surprising about stakeholders in the Chinese water sector was their deeply felt environmentalism, by which I mean their disposition towards the environment was one that remains socially revolutionary—contrary to what a huge deal of ethnographic work has demonstrated for the West (Pia and Ruzol 2023).

Whereas in a Western context, sustainability is often grasped through the lens of technological and financial innovation alone, in China (and elsewhere in Asia), sustainability is also seen as socially generative, a new way of bringing together different communities—technology *cum* diplomacy. Suffice to say that in the diplomacy of sustainability, the bone of contention is not whether or not change will occur, but who will have a say in determining its direction. ■



Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

Soda Science

A Conversation with Susan Greenhalgh

Yangyang CHENG, Susan GREENHALGH

To many, a can of Coke is a refreshing treat or an unhealthy indulgence. For years, companies like Coca-Cola have shaped not just our diet and waistlines, but also science and society. Their influence is not limited to the United States. Alongside their products, Big Soda has exported their ideas of fitness and nutritional science abroad, including to China. How has Coca-Cola managed this, and what does this process say about the relationships between science, society, and the state under different political systems? These are some of the questions explored in the new book *Soda Science: Making the World Safe for Coca-Cola* (University of Chicago Press, 2024). In this conversation, we discuss the book with its author, Susan Greenhalgh.

Yangyang Cheng: Congratulations on the new book! Its title, 'Soda Science', is, I understand, short for 'soda-defence science', as in scientific research, findings, publicity, and policy in defence of carbonated sugary drinks and related products, incentivised by the very companies that manufacture these products—most notably, Coca-Cola. Instead of calling this kind of research propaganda or 'pseudoscience', you emphasise that it is important to take such corporate science seriously and to understand it rather than dismissing it outright. Can you explain why?

Susan Greenhalgh: Let me start with a brief overview of the project. This book is driven by a concern about the hidden corporate corruption of science and the damage it can wreak on unwary societies like China's. In the story I tell, in the 1990s, once obesity rose to epidemic levels in the United States and public health experts began to finger sugary soda drinks as a main culprit, Big Food mobilised a handful of academic scientists to create what I call soda-defence science, aimed not at finding the best solution to a public health problem, but at protecting the profits of the soda industry and the junk food industry more generally. The soda scientists contended that the main solution to obesity was exercise, not dietary restraint, and that soda taxes were not necessary. Few experts agreed with those views.

The first half of the book traces the creation and sudden demise of soda science in the United States during the years 1995 to 2015. The second half follows the American soda scientists to China, where they persuaded their Chinese counterparts to adopt their view of the best obesity science and worked with Chinese scientists to get it built into China's policies on obesity and chronic disease.

The US soda industry's secret weapon was an industry-funded scientific non-profit called International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). Based in Washington, DC, but with branches around the world, ILSI had

sophisticated mechanisms for sponsoring industry-friendly science and exporting it to major markets around the world. ILSI's China branch was run by a very capable former high-level official from the Ministry of Health. Because of her political position and policy clout, ILSI-China was physically located in the Ministry and became the centre of obesity work in the country during the key years of 1999 to 2015. This extraordinary setup gave Big Food a direct hand in the making of China's science and policy on obesity.

The book's aims are both analytical, developing conceptual tools to understand corporate science, and political, holding those responsible to account. To make it accessible to the non-specialist readers, I wrote it as a human story, a narrative tracing the birth, development, death, and afterlife of soda science in the United States and China. Woven throughout its pages, though, are larger themes of potential interest to readers of the *Made in China Journal*: the entanglement of science and the state, the distinctive features of Chinese science, and the extraordinary power of the word 'science' in China.

Going back to your question, you raise a very important point. In America, so many cases of corrupted science have come to light that additional instances tend to produce a kind of collective disgust at the proclivity of large companies to put corporate interests ahead of the public good. The standard response is to simply dismiss the science as junk science or non-science, unworthy of attention.

But corporate science (that is, science funded by companies and created to serve their needs) is more science-like than these observers have acknowledged. Soda science, for example, had all the basic elements of 'ordinary' science: it had data, hypotheses, theories, and the like; it was made by prominent scientists; and it was published in well-known scientific journals. Moreover, the *claim* that corporate science is science gave its makers tremendous power. Its 'science-ness' helped protect soda science from exposure by deterring colleagues from looking too closely at how it was funded and made. Only by taking corporate science seriously *as science* can we understand how soda science became so powerful and went undetected for so long.

Treating corporate science seriously as science allows us to use the tools of science studies to tease out the differences between corporate and academic science and thus answer the big questions about industry-funded science. What drives university-based corporate scientists to do what they do (hint: it's more than money)? Who takes the initiative (it's usually the scientists, not the company)? Why do projects of corporate science matter (they shape not only national policies but also people's ideas, practices, and health)?

YC: It is interesting to read this book about American corporate influence on science in both the United States and China (and likely elsewhere) at this moment, when the US Government has been placing extra scrutiny on perceived Chinese state influence on American science. You elucidate how prevalent yet insidious commercial pressure on academic research can be, and how formal ethical rules often become a formality that protects the institution rather than

public interests. Both the American and the Chinese scientists portrayed in your book faced the same source of corporate corruption: Coca-Cola and Big Soda. They held similar beliefs about scientific objectivity but navigated different ethical norms and political landscapes. What are the most important similarities and divergences in the scientists' approaches to their work between the two countries?

SG: I was excited about studying the transnational circulation of science because it gave me a rare opportunity to compare the workings of the same body of ideas in the two very different political-economic and sociocultural environments of China and the United States. You mentioned some of the main similarities. Another is that researchers in both countries believed in the global hierarchy of scientific value, in which the science of Euro-American countries is unquestionably superior to that of latecomer nations like China. Scientists from both societies saw soda science not as 'corporate science' but as 'American science', and that perception justified its enthusiastic endorsement by Chinese researchers. Chinese experts thought they were getting the best international science, when in fact what they were getting was merely the best-funded and best-promoted science.

The *differences* were pronounced. One of the most important was that in the United States, the soda scientists worked for themselves, while in China, they ultimately worked for the state. Whether based in the China Centre for Disease Control or a university, most researchers worked in state-run organisations on projects assigned and funded by the state. This made a huge difference given the Chinese State's massive political and financial investment in '*keji*' (科技, science and technology).

Another difference concerns the social structure of science communities. In science generally, research communities tend to reflect the culture of which they are a part. Chinese social and political life tends to be hierarchically structured; the same is true of life in scientific communities. The community of obesity researchers was headed by a powerful former high official from the Ministry of Health. She was the *lingdao* (领导, boss); she called the shots, she assigned tasks, and she had the right to keep any and all information—including the details of corporate funding—confidential. By controlling that vital information, she was able to quietly facilitate Coca-Cola's goals while keeping to herself the larger truths about the organisation she led.

YC: Throughout history and in different parts of the world, people have held varying views about the ideal body type. You note that in the United States and especially in this century, being fat is viewed not just as an issue of aesthetics or personal health, but as a moral and civic failing, where the oversized body is weighing down the nation's progress. The Chinese public, at least until very recently, do not necessarily share the same concerns about obesity, but there is a long tradition of strengthening the individual body to also build a strong national body, part of which you have covered brilliantly in your earlier book, *Just One Child* (University of California Press, 2008). While body size is elevated to national significance, both the Chinese and the US

governments have taken a market-oriented approach to addressing obesity, making it primarily an issue of individual responsibility. Why is this the case, and are there notable differences in neoliberal governance between the two countries in terms of regulating diet and nutrition?

SG: Why the market orientation? The short answer is that it's easy (cost-saving, face-saving) for both governments to displace on to individuals both the blame for rising levels of chronic disease and the responsibility for combating it. The state's job is to educate individuals to make the best choices. Market solutions are also a product of the dominant neoliberal thinking of the time (in this case, the 1990s to the 2010s), deemed the correct and virtually only way to go in both countries.

The question of US–Chinese differences in the governance of diet and nutrition is a bit too big to tackle. A systematic comparison of the role of companies in the governance of diet would likely turn up more similarities than we might imagine exist. It's important to realise there has been a big change under President Xi Jinping. For decades, the Chinese State has pursued economic growth at any cost. It was that economy-first approach that led to the shockingly rapid rise in the chronic diseases of modern life: cardiovascular disease, hypertension, obesity, diabetes, and all the rest. But, in 2016, President Xi recognised that a good worker was a healthy worker and began taking health more seriously (WHO n.d.; Xinhua 2016). He urged health be placed at the centre of every policy and instructed the government to begin creating a systematic body of measures to guide diets and lifestyle practices going forward. The new policies continue to call for market solutions and individual responsibility, but the role of the state in managing chronic disease is growing.

YC: In the United States, perceptions of obesity are also racialised, and thinness is associated with whiteness. This prejudice partly reflects and is further reinforced by a racialised geography of wealth and food access: it takes money, space, and leisure to work out, while pricing and food deserts in Black and brown neighbourhoods mean poor people of colour are often forced to subsist on cheap, empty calories. I'm curious about whether this racial dynamic also helped Coca-Cola's narrative in shifting the focus from diet to exercise, or whether you have noticed racialised messaging in soda-defence science as well.

SG: This is a great question that I address only briefly in the book. Racial logics do indeed inform soda science, but in ways that have been carefully hidden. In the United States, the ideal of the thin, fit body has been achievable primarily by educated, white, upper-income people, who have the means to reach it—'the money, space, and leisure to work out', as you say. In pushing the exercise-first solution, the soda scientists advanced the idea that anyone with sufficient willpower could lose weight and keep it off by simply following their lifestyle prescriptions. Their *Step Diet Book*, which gave central place to the results of a multi-year study of primarily white, middle-class women, told readers that if

these folks can do it, ‘*so can you*’ (Hill et al. 2004: 30). This apparently race-free assurance, though, was a false promise that worked to blame those least able to reach the ideal: racial and class minorities.

For its part, Coca-Cola has long targeted young ethnic minorities in the United States and youth of colour around the world as its main market. By attracting youthful drinkers, the hope has been to create a market of Coke lovers for life. Photos of young Black Americans or young people of many ethnic backgrounds in the Global South playing basketball or football before breaking to enjoy a Coke send the message that the company’s sugary water brings good health and vigour. These associations all work invisibly, until you start thinking about the world as the racialised place it is.

YC: Chinese society has its own racialised notions of the body and health, some of which have been useful to the Chinese State, as seen in the institutionalisation of traditional Chinese medicine. The Chinese public also raises significant and vocal opposition to certain Western food technologies, such as genetically modified organisms. Many Chinese people—including my mother—insist that a Chinese body is radically different from a Caucasian body. The ‘success’ of soda science in China, in service of Coca-Cola’s corporate interests, seems even more remarkable in this regard. You describe a confluence of factors, from the privileging of Western science and trust in technical authority in the reform era to the Chinese State’s relative neglect of nutritional science, as well as the personal connections and political acumen of individual Chinese scientists. Is soda science unique in terms of Western corporate science in China? Are there other examples or more general lessons, and did soda science face significant pushback in China at any point?

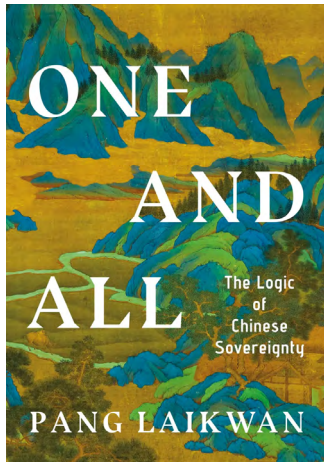
SG: Obesity science supports your mother’s view that the Chinese body is different from the bodies of ‘the standard Euro-American’. Chinese bodies (or, more accurately, East Asian bodies) tend to have more central (belly) fat, upper body fat, and visceral abdominal fat than Caucasians. Excess fat in these locations is more closely linked to diet-related chronic diseases. East Asians develop the chronic diseases associated with obesity—diabetes, osteoarthritis, heart disease, some cancers—at lower body mass index (BMI) levels than do other bodies. For that reason, China adopted BMI cut points that were lower than the global standard. The World Health Organization uses 25 and 30 to mark the lower levels of overweight and obesity; in China the cut points are 24 and 28. Obesity is less visible in Chinese settings than in many places, so people are less concerned about it as a health issue, when they should perhaps be more concerned.

Soda science is highly unlikely to be the only case of corporate science in China. The state’s welcoming attitude to foreign funding of Chinese science, combined with a climate tolerant of fairly high levels of scientific misconduct, has created an environment in which corporate attempts to skew science could flourish. Yet, because of the secrecy surrounding these things, we have no idea how pervasive the corporate funding and distortion of science really is. My suspicion is it’s much more common than anyone realises.

Until 2015, few people had any idea that Coca-Cola was aggressively, if quietly, pushing exercise. So, Chinese researchers would not have been aware of any of this. To the contrary, they thought they were following international best practice in prioritising physical activity for obesity. My research suggests that, although the leaders of ILSI-China were aware that corporate funding of ILSI gave industry leaders ultimate power in the organisation, they may not have realised that the food industry had skewed the science of obesity they had imported and endorsed. Even now, in China, there is little to no awareness of Coca-Cola's role in perverting science and shaping policy in the country. The response I often hear from Chinese scientists is that the lead figure in the Coca-Cola saga (who is now deceased) was very well respected in China, the implication being that I should not tarnish her legacy, even if my data suggest some of her activities were problematic.

YC: Thanks so much for taking the time to share your thoughts with us! Is there something you would like to add before we wrap up this conversation?

SG: Just one more thing. As we all know, the Party-State is militant about controlling policy in China. My discovery—that soda science penetrated China's policymaking apparatus to shape health policy—should be a scandal. What will happen when the findings of this book reach China's leaders? Will they be incensed that a foreign company managed to leave its imprint on Chinese policy? Or will the state's ties to the Coca-Cola Company—seen, for example, in the joint bottling venture between the state-owned enterprise COFCO (中糧) and Coca-Cola—keep the issue under wraps? I look forward to seeing how this plays out! ■



One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty (Stanford University Press, 2024).

One and All

A Conversation with Pang Laikwan

Christian SORACE, PANG Laikwan

Pang Laikwan's *One and All: The Logic of Chinese Sovereignty* (Stanford University Press, 2024) is a critical exploration of the Chinese concepts and structures of sovereignty in imperial, republican, socialist, and post-socialist periods. The book traces how sovereignty branches out into articulations of popular, territorial, and economic sovereignty. With this genealogy in mind, Pang shows how the current regime's obsession with sovereignty is also an anxiety that cuts across the twentieth century in China. One source of anxiety is China's social plurality and the spectre of political possibility it represents, swirling underneath all thunderous claims to unity.

Christian Sorace: Your book takes aim at several myths that legitimate political authority. You write: 'The idea of popular sovereignty might be one of the biggest myths in China's modern politics' (p. 111). It would be wonderful if you could elaborate this point for our audience, but I also would like to push you a bit further: when is popular sovereignty more than its aesthetic representation? Is the concept of 'the people' still available for political subjectivity?

Pang Laikwan: Yes, popular sovereignty is essential to democracy, and the 'people' are the owners of popular sovereignty. Popular sovereignty represents the political subjectivity of a group of people who are the masters of themselves. But the term 'people' is also highly abstract, if not empty. We can look at the different Chinese terms employed to carry this concept, all of which have slightly different connotations, to understand the many meanings attached to the term. For example, *guomin* (國民) and *minzhong* (民眾) were widely used during the Republican period, while *renmin* (人民) is the official term of the People's Republic of China (PRC). These terms all suggest a multitude, in contrast to the singular individual, *geren* (個人), who is not given the political entitlement and responsibilities suggested by the pluralistic terms. But these terms still differ. Roughly speaking, *guomin* is the citizen, *minzhong* is the masses, while *renmin* is the master of the nation. They all have different connotations. I can give you an example. One of Sun Yat-sen's last letters opens with the two famous sentences:

For 40 years I have devoted myself to the cause of the *people's* revolution with but one end in view, the elevation of China to a position of freedom and equality among the nations. My experiences during these 40 years have firmly convinced me that to attain this goal, we must bring about a thorough awakening of our own *people* and ally ourselves in a common struggle with those peoples of the world who treat us on the basis of equality. (Sun 1925; emphasis added)

Here the Chinese original of ‘the people’s revolution’ is *guomin geming* (國民革命), while ‘our own people’ is *minzhong* (民眾). We can say that in this passage *guomin* is the end, while *minzhong* is the means. When are we the people the end of the political project and when are we the means? When are we ‘enlightened’ and when are we not? To me, the word ‘people’ is always rhetorical, and the different Chinese terms help us see the subtle discursive manipulations.

In the book, I want to demonstrate how popular sovereignty, in whatever disguise, is central to the political rhetoric of all major political regimes as long as they need to justify their own sovereignty, to justify the enormous power they collect. This operates under the fact that universal suffrage is never exercised in this country. I am not proposing representative democracy as a superior political system, but we must admit that popular sovereignty remains a myth. I support all activist efforts to propose and experiment with democracy in China, but as scholars, we must also maintain some critical awareness.

CS: You also take on the ‘fetishisation of revolution’ in China today—that is, how the Chinese revolution is treated as a sacred event in a decidedly anti-revolutionary, if not wholly de-politicising, manner. I have also been thinking lately about how the promotion of ‘revolutionary culture’ (革命文化) is the antithesis of ‘cultural revolution’ (文化革命). The former is about state glorification, whereas the latter is a mass practice, with unpredictable consequences. In your view, what is the role of revolution in Chinese culture and society today?

PL: Yes, ‘revolution’ is another loaded term in China’s political economy. It refers to a series of historical happenings that, according to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), paved the way to its current sovereignty. As I mention in Chapter 4 of the book, the PRC resorts to a historical rationality to justify its sovereign legitimacy—that the sovereignty passed from the Qing court to the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT), and from the KMT to the CCP with the proper endorsement of the people. This teleological account is most characteristically presented in the PRC Constitution. While constitutions around the world vary in their degree of emphasis on tradition and breaking with the past, the Chinese Constitution is unique in its very heavy stress on history. In the most recent (1982) Constitution, which was written to correct the radical Maoism that had dictated the previous two documents adopted in the 1970s, identifies a running tradition of revolution from the late Qing era to now, which, tacitly understood, justifies the current sovereignty. Revolution was undoubtedly a historical event that represented the will and dedication of some people to overthrow the government with force. But since it became the foundation and source of legitimization of a new regime, it was also highly romanticised by that regime.

In China today, the term revolution often suggests an aura, a culture, or a sense of pride. But, as I write in the book, it is also a term the regime fears the most. Revolution and sovereignty mutually define each other. Revolution brings about new sovereignty, and all sovereignty, one can argue, is based on some prior revolutions. But revolution also brings

down sovereignty, and they are arch enemies. You mention how the current discourse of revolution is against the Cultural Revolution; to me, a Hongkonger, I have a closer reference, which is the 2019 social unrest. Some of you might know that there was a major investigation into, and criminalisation of, the protest slogan ‘Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times’ (光復香港, 時代革命) in Hong Kong’s courts in 2021. Hong Kong judges officially deemed the slogan ‘capable of inciting others to commit secession’ and therefore effectively banned it (Ho 2021). So, the sight of propaganda posters or slogans in the mainland featuring the term ‘revolution’ fills me with awe.

CS: Another key term in your book is sovereignty and how it has been redefined through the logic of securitisation. How was sovereignty different in the Mao period? How is it understood today? And can we imagine alternative conceptions and practices of sovereignty that are not a coercive unity but a ‘comradeship of differences’ (p. 24)?

PL: Although this book is primarily about China, sovereignty is a central concept in both Western political theory historically and the current popular political discourses. In the past few years, governments all over the world have been using the term; it is directly associated with the growing anxiety around state security. We remember that the concern for state security was also blown up in the United States after 9/11, and the governmental response was due less to supporting sovereignty than to fighting terrorism, because what concerned the US Government at that time was using all means to exterminate its state enemy. China’s current concern is both external and internal, and sovereignty both demands and assumes the unity of the Chinese people. During the Maoist time, there was also an anxiety about sovereign unity, but it was situated in a Cold War geopolitics, against both the Soviet Union and the United States, while there was also a Beijing-centred international communist network being formed against the one centred in Moscow.

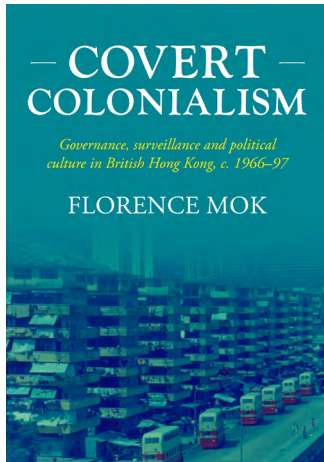
I remember Wang Hui mentioned one time that sovereignty is primarily a post-socialist term. He might be right that the term was not circulated widely before the 1990s, but it was a key point of debates about the China–Soviet relationships from the late 1950s all the way to the early 1970s. This is due primarily to Moscow’s heavy emphasis on its leadership role in the socialist world. As I write in Chapter 2 of the book, despite increasing criticism—particularly from the people of the subsidiary countries—Moscow did not alleviate its heavy-handed intervention in its ‘brotherly’ countries. Instead, the Soviet Union advocated the idea of ‘limited sovereignty’ to describe the fraternal diplomatic relations with other socialist countries in the Soviet Bloc, allowing the Soviet Union to intervene in countries where socialist rule was supposedly under threat. The PRC was highly critical of this practice because China was one of those subsidiary countries. But it could be argued that the new socialist network Beijing tried to build at that time was also committing the same problem. Internationalism is a principle that poses many challenges to state sovereignty. But I

want to emphasise that both state sovereignty and the international alliances meant to challenge the former could be problematic in their different ways. There were those moments of hope around Bandung and different versions of Soviet internationalism, and humanity was promised that something like a ‘comradeship of differences’ could be realised. However much we have been disappointed, it is still a hope we should not give up.

CS: To conclude, I would like to discuss one more term: landscape. You write about socialist landscape painting as a glorification of sovereign power and spiritual connection with national territory. In your view, why do landscapes become the property of the nation and state?

PL: Yes, the rise of the landscape in the Tang–Song period was phenomenal in the entire Chinese arts history. Since then the genre of *shanshui* (山水, ‘mountain and river’) has been considered the most revered in Chinese visual arts. It is used to represent both the power of the court (the grandeur of the imperial territory) and the power of the literati (the serenity of the recluse), and the two might sanction or challenge each other. Entering the socialist period, the new regime decided to use this genre to glorify the new sovereignty, although the genre also underwent a lot of revision under the tutorage of the state and the party to purge its former feudalist elements. As the landscape is situated at the intersection between culture and nature, politics and arts, I found it an illuminating art form to illustrate many ideological problems of the time.

In fact, the landscape is a heavily politicised genre not only in traditional Chinese paintings but also, for example, in European and American arts, in which landscape signals power and ownership. Kōjin Karatani (1993: 19–40) discusses landscape as a structure of perception that marked the rise of the modern subject in Japan, while there are also scholars arguing that landscape can be used to classify civilisations. Cartography could also be understood as a form of landscape—or the other way around. As observed in so many military aggressions in history, sovereignty is always about territory. Landscape, as a representation of land, is heavily invested with political meanings precisely because it signals the power of those who own the land. Although Karatani’s focus is the interiorisation of the external, this can also be understood as a mechanism of ownership. ■



Covert Colonialism: Governance, Surveillance and Political Culture in British Hong Kong, c. 1966–97 (Manchester University Press, 2023).

Covert Colonialism

A Conversation with Florence Mok

Anna TING, Florence MOK

Covert Colonialism: Governance, Surveillance and Political Culture in British Hong Kong, c. 1966–97 (Manchester University Press, 2023) examines state–society relations in one of the United Kingdom’s last strategically important colonial dependencies, Hong Kong. Using underexploited archival evidence, it explores how a reformist colonial administration investigated Chinese political culture, and how activism by social movements in Hong Kong impacted on policymaking. This book is framed by the organisational capacity of the colonial state to monitor public opinion—notably, through covert opinion-polling exercises. People in Hong Kong had extremely limited democratic rights, but these exercises constructed ‘public opinion’, which was used by unelected officials to respond to public needs and minimise social conflict. There were two implications of this shift in colonial governance. On the one hand, the covert polling exercises provided the colonial government with the organisational capacity to conduct surveillance, monitoring Chinese society closely: this was a manifestation of ‘covert colonialism’—a strategy to strengthen British control of Hong Kong. On the other hand, the presence of these exercises indicated that the mentality of the colonial bureaucrats was changing. This was an acknowledgement that Hong Kong, an atypical colony that was expected to retrocede to China rather than gain independence, was moving towards a new form of ‘decolonisation’. Significantly, covert colonialism allowed ordinary people to take part in the policymaking process in a state-controlled manner that would not provoke a hostile response from China. This effort by the colonial government to manage public opinion interacted in complex ways with a diverse variety of Chinese communities engaging with new political movements.

Anna Ting: The archival materials you present illuminate the social and political changes that took place in Hong Kong between 1966 and 1997, especially the development of the city’s political culture. As you note, Hong Kong was an anomaly in the decolonisation processes that took place from the 1950s, remaining a colony until 1997. Can you explain why you decided to title your book ‘Covert Colonialism’ and how this relates to the changes in governance in colonial Hong Kong as the rest of the world was busy decolonising?

Florence Mok: While most colonial territories were experiencing decolonisation, Hong Kong had no prospects of becoming independent. The colonial government also could not introduce any democratic reforms,

primarily because the People's Republic of China (PRC) had always believed that the treaties that governed Hong Kong's status were unequal and invalid, and asserted that Hong Kong was part of its territory; it perceived British administration in the colony to be only temporary. However, after the 1966 riots, when peaceful demonstrations turned violent after the Transport Advisory Committee approved the Star Ferry Company's request to increase fares, and the 1967 riots, when industrial disputes evolved into serious confrontations between pro-Beijing local leftists and the colonial government, political culture in Hong Kong was evidently changing, especially with the younger generation beginning to consider Hong Kong as their home and questioning their relationships with the colonial government. In this context, the colonial government's failure to understand changing public opinion was dangerous, potentially undermining its legitimacy. To restore confidence after the riots, enhance the legitimacy of the colonial bureaucracy, and improve state-society communications, they had to reform their governing strategies. This gave rise to the Town Talk and Movement of Opinion Direction (MOOD) covert polling exercises, which were embedded in the City District Officer Scheme, the first direct state-society communication channel introduced by the colonial government in the hopes of increasing political participation without implementing democratic reforms or enhancing the power of the Urban Council. The exercises were a key innovation that was developed to counter the criticism of the lack of constitutional development in Hong Kong, gauge public opinion, and mitigate popular grievances. To some extent, these mechanisms could be viewed as a substitute for representative democracy. It enabled the undemocratic colonial government to widen the channels of political participation for ordinary people in a state-controlled manner without provoking China's resistance or politicising the Hong Kong Chinese. It shows how the mentalities of bureaucrats were changing, moving towards 'decolonisation'.

This sounds very positive superficially, so why would I call it 'covert colonialism'? First, it is because these changes were contingency responses to crises (the 1966 and 1967 riots). They were not initiated by the colonial government with the sole intention of 'public participation'. Instead, they provided the colonial government with the organisational capacity to conduct surveillance and monitor local society closely. Most importantly, with Town Talk and MOOD's existence being concealed from the public, the colonial government had the leeway to decide when to follow public opinion (unlike in a democracy). This technique in fact both enhanced and limited the ability of the public to influence the policymaking process. As we can see from the book's case studies, the mechanism's function as an intelligence device was prioritised over the aim to increase popular political participation. This is why I named this book 'Covert Colonialism'.

AT: The colonial administration reports reveal fascinating insights into the development of the political culture in Hong Kong in the latter decades of colonial rule. For the book, you utilised an inductive method in exploring the archival sources. How did you approach these sources and what methods did you use to organise the material and piece together your selected cases for illuminating Hong Kong's political development and culture?

FM: My evidence comes primarily from archives in Hong Kong and London. These underexploited files are useful as they provide a novel understanding of how social movements were organised and how the state responded to political activism—the focus of this book. In these official records, the way officials and activists described social movements in private correspondences and petitions illustrates participants' political orientations and how activists and organisations were mobilised. Official surveys and observations also record how ordinary Hong Kong Chinese viewed political activism, which can be used to analyse the political culture of different groups in the colony. Correspondences between policymakers shed light on the mood and explain reasons behind administrative, legislative, and institutional changes. These were the things that I looked for when examining official records.

However, no archival records are perfect. It is inevitable that some of these records could be biased, reflecting the thoughts of colonial bureaucrats rather than capturing the viewpoints of the public accurately. For this reason, I also collected and consulted unofficial records, such as newspapers (both Chinese and English), pamphlets, and student newsletters. The mass media played a significant role in constructing the collective sense of the Hong Kong community. Some of the campaigns, such as the *China Mail* anticorruption campaign—which advocated the separation of the anticorruption branch from the Hong Kong Police—were centred on the media. Therefore, using these unofficial voices to corroborate and contest the official narratives has been helpful.

I based the selection of my case studies—the Chinese as the Official Language Movement, the Anticorruption Movement, the campaign against the telephone rate increases, the campaign to reopen the Precious Blood Golden Jubilee Secondary School, the changing immigration discourse and policy, and the *British Nationality Act* controversy—on five criteria. First, they had to involve significant and controversial issues, which can be used to reveal the main tensions in state–society relations in Hong Kong. All the cases involved political activism and/or extensive discursive exchanges at all levels of society. Second, these cases include both positive and negative responses from the authorities, which makes it possible to identify under what circumstances it was more likely for social movement and public opinion to exert pressure on the colonial government and successfully influence its policies. Third, these events and issues covered most of the late colonial era, which allowed me to assess the shifting political culture and ruling strategies. Fourth, these campaigns are either inadequately covered by the existing scholarship or at least have some aspects that are under-investigated.

And, finally, for all cases there are abundant state records in archives in both London and Hong Kong, which makes it feasible to gauge both popular reactions to these events and the government's responses.

AT: I am curious about the officers who were conducting public monitoring in the colonial government's Town Talk and MOOD schemes. In general, who were they and how were they recruited? Can you explain their role and the extent to which they were involved in policymaking processes? Were there tensions between them and the public?

FM: Town Talk was prepared mainly by Liaison Assistants, Liaison Officers, and City District Officers (CDOs). Most of them were Chinese rather than expats. They were not 'recruited' specifically for these exercises, but they were existing civil servants in the City District Offices or the Home Affairs Department. They were not exactly involved in the policymaking process, yet they were the 'bridge' between the public and the policymakers. These officers were responsible for collecting opinions independently—that is, without a uniform or standardised set of methods—from these 10 city districts. CDOs also attended routine staff meetings with field staff in different departments to gather the comments they picked up. This information they solicited would be analysed and included in the Town Talk and MOOD reports, which would be read by policymakers, such as heads of departments, the governor, and officials in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. Yes, there were tensions between CDOs and the public, and the latter were not even informed that their opinions were considered by policymakers. Many speculated about the intentions of the government and CDOs in newspapers in the 1970s (they probably could see CDOs were trying to make note of people's comments, sending out questionnaires, making observations, but did not know what these were for!). And, according to MOOD's observations in 1975, the Chinese communities felt that their demands were not always met despite public consultation:

AT: Across the case studies you present, the shifting and at times contradictory dynamics in the political culture appear to have played a role in informing the varying levels of radicalism and support for confrontational political activism among different groups. In particular, you note that support often depended on ideological and instrumental concerns, and that political conservatism was often a symptom of the desire for political stability, especially among older generations and blue-collar workers. To what extent would you say that the political conservatism and pragmatism among these groups contributed to the relative lack of anticolonial movements and uprisings compared with other places experiencing decolonisation processes? Or were relatively low levels of resistance against the colonial state a result of Hong Kong as an anomaly in the contemporary move towards decolonisation?

FM: The 'political conservatism' of the working class to some extent was also related to Cold War politics and internal developments in China. As Benjamin Leung (1991: 202) has pointed out, the scale and frequency of industrial actions taken by the working class in Hong Kong

were determined by ‘the strength of labour organisations and the development of major political events locally and in mainland China’. In the early postwar period, trade unions were aligned either to the PRC or to Taiwan. Workers were therefore only mobilised by the politics of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. The level of industrial action was relatively high during the period from 1946 to 1949, as the Chinese Engineers’ Institute—an independent trade union that counted many skilled workers in its ranks—was able to create cohesions among workers, making effective mobilisation possible. The leadership of the Chinese Engineers’ Institute was replaced with politically oriented trade unions, which were established in the late 1940s. However, during the period from 1950 to 1959, the level of industrial strikes remained low as trade unions focused on providing welfare benefits to workers and recruiting more members. With a lack of financial and ideological support from big trade unions, industrial strikes in the 1950s were minimal. The labour movement only started to be more active again in 1967, when rising costs of living coincided with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in China. After the 1967 riots, and especially in the 1970s, the working class was stabilised due to the PRC’s improved relations with the West and adoption of the peaceful coexistence policy.

I would say the older generations and working class were conservative compared with, for example, the younger generation. However, as the book has suggested, it does not mean that anticolonial movements were entirely absent. The 1967 riots, which were influenced by politics in China, were a perfect example that workers could be anticolonial and radical. I would say Hong Kong still witnessed a lot of political activism and social movements during the colonial era, but people’s previous experiences as refugees and the influence of the Cold War probably constricted these movements in terms of their scale and level of radicality. The tensions between political activism and the culture of de-politicisation in turn gave rise to ‘gradualism and reformism within a framework of stability and prosperity’ (Lam 2004: 180), which in turn benefited the colonial government. Activists therefore adopted a reformist attitude towards social changes rather than trying to overthrow the colonial government.

AT: Following on from the previous question, what role did the younger generation born and raised locally in the postwar period play in buttressing the development of Hong Kong’s political culture, especially the emergence of political radicalism? Did they experience tensions in balancing civic pride, nationalism, and self-determination?

FM: Yes, definitely. The younger generation, particularly those with higher education, had a completely different political outlook and were the main political actors in the late 1960s and 1970s, when the political culture in Hong Kong was first changing. One of the MOOD reports in the 1970s captures their role quite well:



Foisonnement d'enseigne, Hong Kong. Source: Gilpivert (CC), www.gilpivert.fr.

There is still a feeling that, where the government has consulted the public, and in the end takes a decision rejecting some of the suggestions or recommendations from them, more effort should be made to explain why. These critics maintain that the government is, in their view, more interested in finding out public reactions after confronting them with a *fait accompli* than in consulting them sincerely. (Hong Kong Public Records Office 1975)

These negative remarks suggested that the communication barrier between the colonial state and the Chinese society persisted.

Even discounting radical elements and those with political affiliations, students and youths generally hold significantly different, and largely less favourable views of the government than their elders ... Their idealistic outlook on life results in their distrust of compromise and impatience in their wait for an egalitarian society. Although on the whole, the younger generation in Hong Kong is much less revolutionist than their counterparts in many other countries, their move towards greater social consciousness and their demand for greater participation in the evolution of society will certainly continue to increase. (Hong Kong Public Records Office 1975)

With the rise of the PRC, the younger generation started asking a lot of questions about their relationship with their ‘motherland’. Their political allegiance towards the PRC could be observed from the rhetoric they employed in various movements—notably, the Chinese as the Official Language Movement in the early 1970s, which was a significant campaign that led to the legalisation of Chinese as the official language of Hong Kong in 1974 and removed the communication barrier between the colonial regime and Chinese society. Western-educated elites in Hong Kong society were inclined to find the concept of nationalism appealing when they challenged the status quo. After the 1967 riots, there was an ‘identity crisis’. These intellectual youths were looking for political ideologies that could offer them new identities. As the notion of nationalism placed cultural identity at the centre of its concern, the young generation could construct a new political identity from the concept of nationalism. On the one hand, nationalism legitimated their claims to political self-determination; on the other hand, the concept also allowed them to refer to their indigenous identity.

AT: Since the handover in 1997, the political climate in Hong Kong has changed significantly and there has been widescale political participation among the population. The events of the latter decades of the twentieth century clearly set the scene for the political activism that has occurred in recent years. In 2019, we saw protestors appeal to the UK Government for support for the anti-Extradition Amendment Bill movement. How can we trace these appeals, and the demands made in the post-handover period for universal suffrage more generally, back to the emergence of a local political culture in the late 1960s? And how can we understand the paradox of appealing to a former colonial power for help in this political context?

FM: I guess the book cannot address this very broad question fully. However, I hope it at least offers some insights into some leftover issues from the colonial era (such as the *British Nationality Act*, which stripped two and a half million Hong Kong Chinese of their rights of abode in the United Kingdom and provoked a sense of betrayal at that time) and the core values that people still hold on to in today’s Hong Kong (such as the use of traditional Chinese and Cantonese and the freedom to protest). It also provides a snapshot of how the colonial government tackled various political and social problems in the late colonial era, which were precursors to many important changes in postcolonial Hong Kong. And the way the colonial government handled these issues in the 1960s and 1970s also forms a strong contrast with the approaches taken by the Hong Kong Government today.

In all societies—not just Hong Kong—memories are employed to sustain a sense of legitimacy, suppression, or injustice and to solicit popular support for social movements and political campaigns. In Hong Kong’s case, memories are also highly selective and sometimes inaccurate. Since the 2010s, there has been a growing sense of colonial nostalgia. In particular, the narrative that rule of law is a British legacy and contributed to Hong Kong’s stability and prosperity is widely propagated by different pro-democracy activists. Some individuals

also believe that the British still have moral obligations to Hong Kong, which explains why some activists would appeal to the United Kingdom for help in 2019.

AT: On a final note, you mention that the archival records you examined for your book have only recently been made available to the public, and thus have been underexploited. Do you think increasing scholarship and public dissemination of knowledge on these archives could influence perceptions of coloniality among Hong Kong people today?

FM: Definitely. Misuse of history is still common in today's Hong Kong, especially with increased political polarisation. If we look at recent public discourse, it is easy to spot different categories of 'falsification of history', such as factual inaccuracies, misinterpretation, anachronism, neglect of context, and selective bias. This could be simply caused by false memories. However, sometimes people's current priorities might lead them to highlight some aspects of the past and exclude others. Having increasing scholarship and public dissemination of knowledge would help to mitigate this and provide people with a more accurate understanding of Hong Kong's colonial past. ■

CONTRIBUTORS

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